

BECOMING THE CROSSROADS: FEMALE CULTURAL CREATORS OF THE
MEXICAN AMERICAN GENERATION IN THE TEXAS BORDERLANDS

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the cultural accomplishments of Mexican American women in 20th century Texas, looking at how women in the arts paved the way for a new Mexican American hybrid identity. I examine how Mexican American women in the borderlands, as Gloria Anzaldúa so aptly put it, “became the crossroads” in their bodies, minds and spirits. By examining the lives and work of the four women Jovita González, Rosita Fernández, Alicia Dickerson Montemayor, and Consuelo “Chelo” González Amezcua, I have demonstrated that Mexican American women broke boundaries of their own culture and of Anglo Texas culture in order to create their art. In the process of becoming American, they flouted the conventional gender roles and paved the way for a generation of Chicana artists, musicians, and authors. My research was conducted in archives throughout Texas, by examining and analyzing letters, manuscripts, newspapers, recordings, films, TV and video clips, magazines, and art work.

As artists of the borderlands, the women I researched participated in laying the groundwork for a hybrid Mexican American identity, developing Mexican American art that paved the way for the development of a distinctive Mexican American culture by the hybridization and use of common Mexican forms and references in their art, through which they reinforced and redefined Mexican American culture while telling stories that had not been told before.

DEDICATION

To the memory of my mother, Katherine Lee Grant, and to Lucy Kruse, with thanks and gratitude for your support. Thank you, Lucy Kruse, for instilling in me from an early age a love and respect for the culture of the borderlands.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Literature and Background

This dissertation examines the lives of four Mexican American Mexican American female cultural creators in Texas between 1920 and 1975—women who transgressed the boundaries of their own culture and of the dominant Anglo culture in both their lives and their art. In the process of becoming American they flouted the conventional gender roles of their own culture, and sometimes of Anglo culture as well. In this dissertation, I look at how Mexican American women in the borderlands, as Gloria Anzaldúa so aptly put it, “became the crossroads,”¹ in their bodies, minds and spirits. During the revolutionary period and thereafter, Texas Mexican women worked as journalists for radical newspapers sponsored by the *Partido Laborista Mexicano* (PLM), Mexico’s labor party, *e.g.*, *La Mujer Moderna*.² They formed associations of nurses to cross the border to treat injured revolutionary soldiers³ and published feminist magazines based on revolutionary principles. Some women became labor activists, like San

¹Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.

²Teresa Palomo Acosta, “*La Mujer Moderna*,” in *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association, 1999), accessed March 17, 2011, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/eel09>. *La Mujer Moderna* was a feminist San Antonio paper founded by Andrea and Teresa Villarreal, sisters associated with the PLM and with a group of female intellectuals in the period, including Laredo poet and activist Sara Estela Ramírez, who worked for revolution in both Texas and Mexico.

³Nancy Baker Jones, “Leonor Villegas de Magnon,” in *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association, 1999), accessed March 16, 2011, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fvi19>.

Antonio communist and labor leader Emma Tenayuca, who organized Mexican women working as pecan shellers.⁴

A few women, like those I examine in this dissertation, were creators—artists, musicians, scholars, and novelists. Working in the creative arts involved the flouting of convention in many ways. As I will demonstrate, Mexican American women generally were expected to stay close to home and family and remain subservient to men, instead of pursuing their own craft or performing in public, where they would make themselves open to the masculine gaze. For women in Mexican American culture at this time, performing in public was seen as scandalous, especially if they were not accompanied by family members. Simply creating their art was a transgression of gender norms. Choosing not to marry and have children—or refusing to put family at the center of their lives—was also seen as a transgression. For Mexican American women during this period, attending college and earning a master’s degree, as Jovita González did, was unusual. González’s novels and scholarship, which went against the grain of current Anglo triumphalist views of history, were certainly a radical departure from the traditional narrative. Working as an artist was a particularly difficult choice for working class women like Del Rio artist Consuelo “Chelo” González González Amezcua, who could not pay for art lessons and sometimes had only scraps of paper to draw on after a full day’s work at Kress Department Store.

⁴Richard Croxdale, “Pecan Shellers Strike,” in *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association, 1999), accessed March 16, 2011, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/oep01>.

In this dissertation, I will argue that these four women broke boundaries of convention to work as artists against difficult odds, building a foundational art, music and literature of the borderlands. As artists of the borderlands, they participated in laying the groundwork for a hybrid Mexican American identity, developing Mexican American art forms that paved the way for the development of a distinctive Mexican American culture through hybridization and the use of common Mexican forms and references in their art, reinforcing and redefining Mexican American culture as well as telling stories that had not been told before.

The borderlands from which their art sprang are both a geographical and cultural construct, physical and spiritual. Geographically, I define the Texas borderlands as reaching south to the city of Monterrey, Mexico, the cultural hub of northern Mexico. Lydia Mendoza and Rosita Fernández began their journeys in Monterrey and returned there frequently. In Monterrey, a *norteño* culture thrives, distinct from that of Central Mexico or the Mexican Gulf Coast. The culture of Monterrey and surrounding areas share many characteristics with Texas, such as a cattle culture in which the manner and dress of the *vaquero*/cowboy is common and where *ranchero* music is popular. The northern boundary of the Texas borderlands is San Antonio. Although not actually on the physical border, San Antonio is so Mexican in population and character that it has historically served as an informal capital of the border lands where Mexican culture flourished and borderland residents on both sides of the geographic United States-Mexican border congregated to earn a living, shop, and attend cultural events.

According to my definition, Jovita González grew up in the borderlands in Roma, Texas, a small town on the Rio Grande. But she also lived in the borderlands when she was a teacher in Corpus Christi, although Mexican culture was less dominant there and the Anglo population was larger and stronger.

Rosita Fernández also lived in the borderlands as a child in Monterrey, Mexico. She traveled the borderlands when playing in the *carpas*, or tent shows of Kingsville and Alice, and when she became a musical sensation in San Antonio.

To a large extent, the border is a cultural construct. It is far more than a geographical boundary. As a national boundary, it is porous, and undocumented immigrants breach its boundaries daily. Border residents also regularly move back and forth across *la frontera* (the border), to visit family, to attend celebrations, and to take care of graves. The border is not just a line dividing Mexico and the United States. It is a space of fluidity in which it is often not clear what language or culture is dominant, nor where U.S. and Mexican cultures meld and blend.

The borderlands, therefore, can be extended to include anywhere that the Mexican culture rubs up against the American. A borderland could be the Mexican Chicago of author Sandra Cisneros⁵ or the streets of Cancun, where Mayan workers rub shoulders with American tourists.

Feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa saw the border as an open wound. “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and

⁵Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1991).

bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.”⁶

She goes on to say that the border is used to “distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”⁷ Therefore, the borderlands are the natural habitation of the artist because the forbidden and prohibited are familiar terrain for the artists. For the female Mexican American artist, it was necessary to break away from conventional mores and customs and to live in a murky, uncertain, intellectual and spiritual borderland in which she developed new hybrid art forms and new means of expression.

I chose these particular women to include in the dissertation because they were each pioneers in their fields and were among the first to create a foundational art, music, and literature of the borderlands in the 20th century. Each of these women broke boundaries of convention to create her art and helped lay the foundation for the formation of a hybrid Mexican American identity. Few Mexican American women were prominent as visual artists at this time. Not many had master’s degrees or wrote novels. There were a number of recognized female singers at the time, but almost all of them sang only in Spanish and almost exclusively for Mexican American audiences. Rosita Fernández was one of the few who sang for a bi-cultural audience, in both English and

⁶Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/Frontera*, 3.

⁷Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/Frontera*, 21.

Spanish, and who gained widespread acceptance in both groups. Singing in public was a radical act for Mexican-American women throughout much of the 20th century. Yet in the 1930s and 1940s, a few determined Texas Mexican women broke the boundaries of convention to record and perform *Tejano* music. These women sang their songs and publicly proclaimed their Mexican identity during the 1930s, a period of mass deportations of both Mexicans immigrants and Mexican American citizens. In the 1940s and 1950s when the importance of assimilation was being stressed by Mexican Americans, these same women continued to sing the songs of Mexico.⁸ They solidified a sense of Mexican American identity and paved the way for more public roles for Mexican American women.

Mexican women's traditional roles bound them to the home and family. The expectation within Mexican culture was that women would be wives and mothers and that a career was not necessary and probably was improper. These gender roles are outlined well in Sarah Levine's book *Dolor y Alegría: Women and Social Change in Urban Mexico*.⁹ Mexican definitions of womanhood tended to follow the binary of virgin/whore, with the Virgin of Guadalupe on one end of the spectrum and *La*

⁸Yolanda Broyles-González, *Lydia Mendoza's Life in Music: La historia de Lydia Mendoza*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 188.

⁹Sarah Levine, *Dolor y Alegría: Women and Social Change in Urban Mexico* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 25. Levine looks at issues like girlhood in the 1920s through the 1950s, adolescence and courtship, the expectations and reality of marriage, child rearing within the city, and widowhood and old age and then gives an analysis of the changes facing urban women in the 1990s.

Malinche, the indigenous mistress of Hernán Cortés, whom many saw as betraying Mexico to the Spaniards,¹⁰ on the other.

The stereotypes Anglo men generally held of Mexican and Mexican American women was that they were pleasure-loving, jealous, overly-religious, and violent. In a book on the women of 19th century Santa Fe, New Mexico, called *Refusing the Favor*, The Spanish American Women of Santa Fe, 1820 to 1880, a contemporary drawing shows Las Tules, a new Mexican gambling house owner, wearing a rosary over her low-cut ruffled blouse, while dealing cards, a cigarette dangling from her lips.¹¹ In the early 20th century, these images remained. But added to them in the Anglo imagination was the romantic figure of the *soldadera*, the female revolutionary soldier, as well as her alter-ego, the battlefield harpy, along with their more staid but equally threatening sister, the disease-carrying immigrant. A good background on the culture and expectations of Mexican American women can be found in Vicki Ruiz's *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-century America*, and in her *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950*.¹² Alfredo Mirandé and Evengelina Enríquez's *La Chicana: The Mexican-*

¹⁰The basis for this dichotomy is outlined in William French's article "Prostitutes and Guardian Angels: Women, Work and the Family in Porfirian Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 72 (November 1992). Other good works that show the background of gender roles in Mexico include Steve Sterns, *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) and Ana Maria Alonso, *Thread of Blood: Colonialism, Revolution, and Gender on Mexico's Northern Frontier* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1995).

¹¹Deena J. Gonzáles, *Refusing the Favor, The Spanish-Mexican Women of Santa Fe, 1820 to 1880*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

¹²Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930 to 1950* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 10.

*American Woman*¹³ explores the cultural heritage of Mexican American women and their roles within family, work, and education as well as portrayals in literature and feminist efforts. Jane Dysart's "Mexican Women in San Antonio, 1830–1860: The Assimilation Process"¹⁴ is useful in showing earlier roles of Mexican American women in Texas. Cynthia Orozco's *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*¹⁵ examines Mexican American women's roles in the Civil Rights Movement and how they navigated organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

Mexican American women in the early to mid-20th century still were constrained by many traditional roles such as being expected to be wives and mothers. But poverty often forced them into the workplace. This was a time when the roles of Anglo women were changing, and though many Anglo women still were bound by traditional roles, more were going to work outside the home in factories and offices. As Mexican Americans encountered Anglo society, they became more accepting of at least some of the freedoms that were becoming more common for Anglo women.¹⁶

¹³ Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enríquez, *La Chicana: The Mexican-American Woman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 23.

¹⁴ Jane Dysart, "Mexican Women in San Antonio, 1830–1860," *Western Historical Quarterly*. 7, no. 4 (October 1976): 365.

¹⁵ Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁶ The changing role of Anglo women during the mid-20th century is discussed in numerous books, including Laura Hapke's *Daughters of the Great Depression, Women Work and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995); *Rosie and Mrs. America: Perceptions of Women in the 1930s and 1940s* by Catherine Gourley (Minneapolis, MN, Twenty-First Century

One of the most comprehensive analyses of Texas women in the 20th century is Julia Kirk Blackwelder's *Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio, 1929–1939*,¹⁷ in which Blackwelder looks at women from Anglo, Mexican American, and black backgrounds. She argues that in this period San Antonio was governed by a rigid caste system that allowed for almost no social mobility and looks in depth at the very different lives of women of these three ethnic groups in San Antonio.

To understand feminine roles, it also is important to understand constructions of masculinity within a culture. The border tended to heighten masculinity and polarize gender roles. In *Masculinities: Violence and Culture* by Suzanne E. Hatty¹⁸, the author argues that in the 19th century, American manhood was rooted in land ownership or the self-possession of the independent artisan shopkeeper or farmer. With the advent of the market economy, men began their personal feelings of success with economic success. This created the idea of a self-made man, a concept both insecure and volatile but full of possibilities. Hatty looks at how a culture encouraging violent manhood can damage men's sexuality. Studies have argued that instead of muting constructions of masculinity, the border actually seems to throw them into sharper relief. The same may well be true

Books, 2008); and *Right to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* by Alice Kessler-Harris (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003). In *Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), Julia Kirk Blackwelder compares the roles of women from Anglo, Mexican American, and African American groups in Depression-era San Antonio.

¹⁷Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio*. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 8.

¹⁸Suzanne E. Hatty, *Masculinities, Violence and Culture* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2000), 14.

in the hyper-masculine atmosphere of Texas cowboy culture and the masculine constructions that pervaded military bases throughout Texas.

This dissertation is one of the few works that looks at the impact of Mexican American women in a variety of artistic disciplines. The few works on Mexican American women in the arts generally examine only one discipline, literature or music, for example. Also, most works about Mexican American creators deal with the more activist Chicano generation of the late 1960s and 1970s rather than the women who lived much of their lives in the early-to-mid 20th century, the Mexican American Generation.

My dissertation is unique in that it brings together women who excelled in various artistic disciplines and who were of the Mexican American rather than the Chicano generation. During the era of Chicano activism, female artists like Santa Barraza and Carmen Lomas Garza became well-known, but the Mexican American generation produced fewer famous artists, writers, and scholars. Books that examine Mexican American women in the arts generally focus on one very narrow area and contain little or no interpretation of how Mexican American cultural activities affected the broader culture, gender roles, or assimilation. Works such as Francis Abernethy's *Folk Art in Texas*¹⁹ and Kay Turner's *Art Among Us, Arte Entre Nosotros: Mexican American Folk Art of San Antonio*²⁰ detail a very specific sort of art in one city or state.²¹

¹⁹Francis Edward Abernethy, *Folk Art in Texas* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1985), 17.

²⁰Kay Turner, *Art Among Us, Arte Entre Nosotros: Mexican American Folk Art of San Antonio* (San Antonio, TX: San Antonio Museum Association, 1986), 9.

The same is true of *Hecho a Mano: the Traditional Arts of Tucson's Mexican American Community*.²⁰ There are several important books on the Chicano art movement, such as *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985*²² and *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities (Objects/Histories)*.²³ Kendall Ann Curlee compares Alice Dickerson Montemayor to two Anglo Texan folk artists who follow traditional American folk art style,²⁴ but the author does not place her in the context of Mexican American culture, gender roles, and political activism as I do. Cynthia Orozco has written about Montemayor's LULAC work and activism, but not about her art.²⁵

Of all the women I include in this dissertation, Jovita González has been written about the most. Although she is well-known in literary circles, she is not as widely discussed by historians. María Eugenia Coterá was one of the editors of González's literary works and has written scholarly books about her, including a comparison of González with two other anthropologists from the period who come from minority cultures.²⁶ *Gente Decente: A Borderlands Response to the Rhetoric of Dominance* by

²¹James S. Griffith, *Hecho a Mano: The Traditional Arts of Tucson's Mexican American Community* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 4.

²²Richard Griswold del Castillo et al., *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California, Los Angeles & Wight Art Gallery, 1991), 3.

²³Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities (Objects/Histories)*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 17.

²⁴Kendal Ann Curlee, *Three Women, Three Visions: The Paintings of Clara McDonald Williamson, Alice Dickerson Montemayor, and Alma Pennell Gunter* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1991), 5.

²⁵Orozco, *No Mexicans*, 9.

²⁶María Eugenia Coterá, *Native Speakers: Ella Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, Jovita González, and the Poetics of Culture* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 10.

literary scholar Leticia Garza-Falcón looks at González as writing a counter-history to that of Anglo triumphalism.²⁷

Very little has been written about Rosita Fernández. She is, however, mentioned in several general histories of Tejano music such as sociologist Deborah Vargas's *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda*.²⁸

This dissertation is based on several primary archival sources. The Benson Latin American Collection contains works of art and papers of both Montemayor and González Amezcua. The University of Texas at San Antonio holds the papers of Rosita Fernández as well as the photos and recordings. Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi houses the archives of Jovita González and her husband Edmundo E. Mireles.

The Women

In this work, I look at how women's creative activity affected identity formation as they became Mexican American and at whether transgressing the bounds of Mexican American cultural expectations was an important step in the establishment of a Mexican American hybrid cultural identity. For this dissertation, I define transgression as a behavior or action that violates the gender and cultural norms of Mexican and Mexican American society.

²⁷Leticia Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente: A Borderlands Response to the Rhetoric of Dominance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 24

²⁸Deborah Vargas, *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 6.

I ask several questions in order to develop an understanding of the effects these women's creative endeavors had on themselves and the world around them. I ask whether the space of the borderlands helped Mexican American women create a transnational identity that gave them a new freedom and to what extent they embraced an identity that bridged cultures and nation states. I determine whether their creative endeavors and their willingness to transgress cultural norms allowed them more liberty, or if, instead, they simply were restrained by the taboos and restrictions of both Mexican and U.S. culture. I ask how these artist's endeavors were an affirmation of *Mexicanidad*, a valuing and even valorization of Mexican culture.²⁹ Finally, I question to what extent these women, by breaking societal and cultural boundaries, transformed themselves.

Artist and LULAC activist Alicia Dickerson Montemayor broke conventional boundaries for Mexican American women in many ways. She learned to paint when she was in her seventies, depicting the landscapes around her Laredo home. Her paintings made the wild, arid borderlands normative, and she became one of the first to create an art of the borderlands. She worked in the simple, colorful style of Mexican folk artists. Her art work was bi-national in perspective. Married to a Mexican man, she traveled widely in Mexico and along the border. As a self-taught artist with a strong sense of *Mexicanidad*, she was unquestionably influenced by the folk art style of Mexico. Instead of taking up European-derived themes and styles, she observed the world outside her door in Laredo, and made it into art. She placed women in nature at the center of her art,

²⁹Leopoldo Zea, *From Mexicanidad to a Philosophy of History* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), 32.

showing wraithlike women dancing, enraptured amongst the trees, or watching a tropical bird outside the kitchen window. By aligning the strength of women with the power of nature, she created a world where border women and their relationship with nature were at the center rather than the periphery. Long before she became an artist, she was a leader on the national level of LULAC, actively working for Mexican American rights and the rights of women. Her contributions to LULAC played a part in the formation of a hybrid Mexican identity for Mexican Americans in the U.S. She pushed Mexican American women to break the bounds of patriarchy of their own culture and urged Mexican American men to accept women's strength and leadership.

Consuelo "Chelo" González Amezcua lived a quiet, insular life of creativity in Del Rio, Texas, receiving no recognition outside her hometown until she was in her sixties. Though not an outspoken leader like Montemayor, González Amezcua was, in her own way, quite unconventional. A self-taught artist who drew on small scraps of paper and cardboard she found around the house, González Amezcua never married, and worked as a clerk at the S.H. Kress store in Del Rio for much of her life, selling candy and popcorn. She worked on her art quietly, privately for many years, thriving in an elaborate world of her own creation, filled with the art and poetry she made in her off hours. Inspired by her own individualistic and idiosyncratic vision, her drawings displayed a wide range of interests, from Islamic architecture to pre-Columbian history and the natural world. Her drawings also were inspired by her own mystical spirituality. Amy Freeman Lee, a San Antonio art educator, first brought González Amezcua's work to a larger audience when the artist was in her sixties. She became known as a Mexican-

American naïve or “outsider” artist, and her work was a precursor to artists of the Chicano generation like Santa Barraza and Carmen Lomas Garza. González Amezcua was bicultural and knew her native Mexico well, although her family immigrated to Texas when she was only ten. Though her adult life was spent in the United States, her work was distinctly shaped by the art and themes of Mexico and by the history of Spain, particularly its Moorish past. She longed to study at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City, where Diego Rivera and other famous Mexican artists had studied and taught. As a young woman, she wrote to the president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas, asking for a scholarship to the prestigious academy and was granted it. But the death of her father three days after she received word of winning the award prevented her from going, and she stayed home and took the job selling candy at Kress. She identified strongly with both the U.S. and Mexico and traveled widely in Mexico, drawing its architecture and pyramids and writing odes to Mexican cities such as Mérida, the White City of the Yucatan Peninsula.³⁰

While González Amezcua and Montemayor created art that made the mental and physical borderlands the center, Jovita González became one of the first authors to create a literature of the border, writing about the cultural conflicts when Americans invaded South Texas during the Mexican-American war and when Anglos settled the area in the early 20th century. A folklorist by training, she pioneered the recording of Mexican American folktales, customs, and legends. She collected stories, legends, and poems and

³⁰Chelo González Amezcua, “Ode to Merida” in, Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 3, Folder 11 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

later wrote fiction that told of the conflict from the Mexican point of view. She earned a master's degree in folklore from the University of Texas at a time when few Mexican American women attended college. While working as a teacher at Ray High School in Corpus Christi, González and her husband, Mireles, developed a bilingual curriculum and authored several Spanish textbooks, acting as pioneers in the field of bilingual education. In her writing, the border became the center rather than the periphery, with San Antonio and New York seen as distant outposts and the landscape and vegetation of the South Texas and northern Mexico becoming normative.

Singer and actress Rosita Fernández performed the music of her native Mexico to an audience of Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, and Anglos in San Antonio. In addition to her performances, which drew large crowds of tourists and San Antonio residents alike, she sang jingles for local companies such as Gebhardt Mexican Foods Company and Frito-Lay, appeared on the calendar for White Wing Tortillas, and was featured in ads for local insurance companies, all of which allowed her identity to become closely tied with that of San Antonio. She recorded many songs, some with San Antonio as the subject, but she seldom toured. Her husband disapproved of her singing career but eventually allowed her to perform locally. She likely could have enjoyed a career on a larger national stage if she had been allowed to pursue her interest in touring and movie acting. Nevertheless, Fernández solidified a new Mexican American identity, as she brought the folk music and costume of Mexico to the radio waves and performance venues of San Antonio. She became the Anglo's glamorized version of a Mexican American woman. In a city filled with poor Mexican immigrants who lived

with so little social mobility that some historians regarded the situation as a caste system,³¹ she presented a hybrid and palatable Mexican American identity to the Anglo world. She also served as an ambassador from the Mexican American community of San Antonio, creating a public image of the Mexican American woman that was embraced by both cultures.

Theoretical Constructs

The theoretical constructs I use for this dissertation are those of comparative border studies, World Systems theory, internal colonialism, and whiteness studies. By taking a comparative border perspective, I look not only at the crossing of borders of nation states but also at the borders of gender and ethnicity, as women formed new lives in the interstices of the borderlands. Comparative border studies provide the basis for a transnational analysis as well as the ability to compare various groups within the borderlands themselves. In his book on the Pyrenees border between France and Spain, *Boundaries*, Peter Sahlin looks at how the French-Spanish border became fossilized over time.³² The author argues that the common people, not just central governments, must accept a border before it becomes a true boundary of nationhood. According to Sahlin's definition, the U.S.-Mexico border has not been fossilized because the people

³¹Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression*.

³²Peter Sahlin, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

have not entirely accepted it as a national boundary, and the women I write about crossed back and forth at will, their art influenced by both sides.³³

I ground my work in World Systems theory, which divides the world system of labor into powerful core countries and developing, or peripheral, nations. Core nations have the highest concentration of capital and skilled labor, while peripheral nations are characterized by unskilled labor and raw material extractions. The United States, Japan, and many Europe countries belong to the former, while countries such as Mexico, which are seen as exploited and dependent on advanced capitalist countries, are in the latter group and are designated as the periphery.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Immanuel Wallerstein,³⁴ the most famous proponent of World Systems theory, traced the rise of world systems from the 15th century, when the European feudal economy began to be transformed into a capitalist one and Europe gained control of much of the world. This resulted in some economies being more developed than others. He saw the Netherlands, Spain, England, and the U.S. all going through periods of hegemony in which they controlled the world economy. At the national level, the heartland of a country represents the locus of economics and politics, while outlying areas such as the U.S.-Mexican border make up the periphery. In this way of looking at the border, the borderlands are the periphery of the Mexico and the U.S.

³¹Sahlins, *Boundaries*.

³³Robert K. Thomas, "Colonialism: Classic and Internal," *New University Thought* 4 (1969): 37.

³⁴Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1974).

While respecting the basis of this model, I have turned it on its head and use the border as the center, as the lens through which the life of both nations can be illuminated. One of the primary criticisms of core-periphery theory has been the persistence of its focus on economics while ignoring culture. I focus on culture, showing how core-periphery theory can be applied to areas not strictly economic. I show how in each woman's work and life the border becomes the center, affecting outlying areas that others would consider the center.

I also employ the internal colonial model to explain the situation of Mexican American women in the Southwest, although I do not use it in a way that denies them agency. The theory of internal colonialism first gained currency among black nationalists, in particular the Black Panthers, in the 1960s. The Black Panthers originally were formed in response to police brutality in Oakland, California. The Panthers believed that white police were acting as racially superior colonial agents who forced blacks into being subordinate. In his book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, Stokeley Carmichael, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), argued that black communities were internal colonies of the United States.³⁵

Andre Gunder Frank, a founder of dependency theory—a precursor to core-periphery theory—also expounded on internal colonialism in his article “The Development of Underdevelopment,” in which he looks at the relationship between

³⁵Stokeley Carmichael, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York, NY: Vintagel, 1997), 24.

developed capitalist countries and underdeveloped ones, particularly in Latin America.³⁶ He focuses the discussion on metropolises and satellites, with metropolises referring to wealthy countries and satellites to underdeveloped countries, on the periphery of the metropole, showing that wealthy nations like the U.S. maintain their status by exploiting poorer ones, such as Mexico. Frank believed that isolated communities can be infiltrated by larger capitalistic ones, thus creating an economic interpretation of internal colonialism.

Social theorist Robert K. Thomas applied the idea of internal colonialism to Native American communities in the 1967 article “Colonialism, classic and internal.”³⁷ He coined the term “hidden colonialism” in an attempt to better describe how hegemonic groups establish power in colonized communities. Now scholars are studying Iraq as an internal colony of the U.S.

In David Spener and Kathleen Staudt’s *The U.S.-Mexico Border: Transcending Divisions, Contesting Identities*, the authors point out that there are two types of literature on the border, which creates a split discourse. The first type looks at the literal, territorial border while the second group looks at time-space philosophies that challenge modernist ideas rather than observable places or researchable people and things.³⁸

³⁶Andre Gunder. Frank, “The Development of Underdevelopment” in *Development: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences* (London, UK: Routledge, 2005), 34.

³⁷Thomas, “Colonialism: Classic and Internal,” 38.

³⁸David Spener and Kathleen Staudt, *The U.S.-Mexico Border: Transcending Divisions, Contesting Identities* (New York, NY: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 24.

Gloria Anzaldúa, in her 1987 work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* described the second area. She conceives of the border as a place of sexual and spiritual transformation:

The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the borderlands are physically present whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where the lower , middle and upper classes touch, where the space between individuals brings with it intimacy.³⁹

Anzaldúa says that to survive the borderlands, one must be a crossroads. I combine the traditional and post-modern borderland approaches, integrating post-modern literary approaches with empirically grounded historical and social science discourse. I also draw on whiteness studies, analyzing race as a social construction and trying to understand how ideas of whiteness affected these women and the creative work that they did, in particular what ideas of whiteness meant inside Mexican American groups and how these ideas affected women's relationships to both the Mexican American and Anglo communities.

My work also was influenced by scholars who have examined how a distinctive Mexican American culture was formed in the 20th century, such as George G. Sanchez's *Becoming Mexican American*,⁴⁰ which shows how Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles began to develop a Mexican American sense of identity and a distinctive culture as Anglos barred them from assimilating into mainstream U.S. culture by the mass

³⁹Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 3.

⁴⁰George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Los Angeles* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

repatriations of the 1930s followed by the violence against Mexican Americans in the 1940s, such as the Sleepy Lagoon affair and the Pachuco riots.⁴¹ *Becoming Mexican American* also is useful for showing how a distinctive and hybrid border culture developed. Books on barrioization, such as Richard Griswold del Castillo's "*The Los Angeles Barrio*," similarly show how economic marginalization created cultural strength.⁴² Andrés Reséndez's *Changing National Identities at the Frontier* demonstrates how Texans in the 19th century chose their identity based more on the market economy than on ethnicity and provides a window into alternate forms of identity formation besides ethnicity.⁴³

The women I research in this dissertation broke boundaries to create their art. In doing so, they paved the way for a Mexican American hybrid identity, not only in the arts but in society in general. They showed that Mexican American women could form a new identity by breaking cultural boundaries and by creating an art that valued *Mexicanidad* and that would become the foundational art of the borderlands.

⁴¹Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 12.

⁴²Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 7.

⁴³Andrés Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 25.

CHAPTER II

CREATING A LITERARY BORDERLAND

Jovita González brought the rarefied world of the borderlands to mainstream Anglo culture in her folklore and fiction, and became one of the first authors to forge a borderlands literature that described and critiqued the unique world of Mexican Americans in the Rio Grande Valley. She became a crossroads between Mexican American and Anglo culture, between patriarchal Mexican American society and feminism, and between the ideas of the Mexican American and the Chicano generations. She was among the first to collect and study Mexican American folklore. In her fiction *Caballero*⁴⁴ and *Dew on the Thorn*,⁴⁵ she depicted Mexican Americans in revolt against Anglo society at key times in Texas history, including the Texas Revolution, the U.S.-Mexican War, and the early 20th century, when large numbers of Anglo settlers moved to the Rio Grande Valley, displacing Mexican Americans from their land and creating a new system of peonage.⁴⁶ While working as a teacher at Ray High School in Corpus Christi, González and her husband, Mireles, developed a bilingual curriculum and

⁴⁴Jovita González and Eve Raleigh*, *Caballero: A Historical Novel*, ed. María E. Coter and José E. Limón (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 5.

*Eve Raleigh wrote this book under the pseudonym Margaret Eimer.

⁴⁵Jovita González, *Dew on the Thorn* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1997), 12.

⁴⁶David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1838–1936* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987), 17.

authored several Spanish textbooks, acting as pioneers in the field of bilingual education.⁴⁷

González created a literature of the borderlands, and as the daughter and wife of men born in Mexico, her perspective was truly transnational. Her characters move with ease between their ancestral roots in the colonial city of Mier in Tamaulipas, Mexico, to their ranch near Roma, Texas, and back to their townhouse for the society season on the Mexican side of the border in Matamoros. González had an enormous respect for Mexican values and culture, and this *Mexicanidad* pervaded her writing. For her, the borderlands were the center rather than the periphery. Her world was not of New York or Mexico City or even Monterrey and San Antonio, but rather, the ranchlands and small towns of South Texas and northern Tamaulipas, a culture and society few had written about. Despite her association at the University of Texas at Austin with the famous scholar of Southwestern folklore J. Frank Dobie, she wrote history that departed from the triumphalist narrative of Texas history put forth by Anglo scholars of her time. For her, the founding of Texas did not occur with the Texas Revolution, and the founding fathers were not Moses Austin, Sam Houston, or the martyrs of the Alamo but the 18th century Spanish land-grant families who settled the northern Mexican frontier.⁴⁸

She broke the standards of conventional behavior for a Mexican American woman by attending the University of Texas and earning a master's degree, becoming

⁴⁷E.E. Mireles, "Significado del Programa de Español para las Escuelas de Texas" in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 18, Folder 3 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.)

⁴⁸Jovita González, *Life along the Border: A Landmark Tejana Thesis (1930)*, ed. María Eugenia Cotera (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 15.

president of the Texas Folklore Society, conducting field research, speaking in public, and authoring works in history, folklore, and fiction. She critiqued U.S. aggression and dominance in Texas in her writings, examining the actions of invading armies, murders by the Texas Rangers, and land theft at a time when few were writing about these issues at all, much less writing about them from the Mexican American viewpoint. She wrote during a period when Mexican Americans were facing violence and discrimination from the mass repatriations of the 1930s and when the horrors of the Sleepy Lagoon affair and the Pachuco riots had shaken Mexican Americans across the country. They began to develop a distinctive identity as they were barred from mainstream Anglo society.⁴⁹

She also criticized her own Mexican American society, both its class system and its patriarchal structure. In many ways, the Mexican American women in her fiction are rebels, have agency, and determine their own fates even in the midst of often abusive oppression by husbands, fathers, and brothers. She demonstrated in her fiction how Mexican American women often chose the less patriarchal Anglo system over the Mexican, preferring American husbands. The peons in her books show agency as well by choosing to enter the market economy where they will earn wages over the old Mexican hacienda system. They hope to find greater prosperity and respect by working for an Anglo employer rather than the virtual slavery of laboring in the old Mexican peonage system.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 24.

⁵⁰Reséndez, *Changing National Identities*, 37.

Some see González as an accommodationist, working to fit in with Anglo society and to create the perception of herself as an upper class Mexican American woman. Scholars such as José Limón⁵¹ and Leticia Garza-Falcón⁵² have criticized her for her collaboration with J. Frank Dobie and for her acceptance of his Anglo-dominated view of history as well as for her failure to offer a strong critique of the social conditions in which Mexican Americans lived in Texas. Although these criticisms have some validity, I argue that within the context of her times, she was a rebel who crossed both ethnic and gender boundaries of convention. She sharply criticized American invaders who came to Texas during the Texas Revolution of the 1830s, during the Mexican American war of the 1840s, and in the early 20th century when Anglo landowners bought up land from Mexicans in nefarious land deals and outright theft, creating a new system of peonage.⁵³

However, like many middle class, educated Mexican Americans of her generation, she sought whiteness. During her era, a flood of migrants fleeing the Mexican Revolution came to the United States, and Texans began to see a “second color menace.”⁵⁴ Poorer, more “native” Mexicans were viewed as unfit for citizenship and as ineligible for the privileges of whiteness.⁵⁵ A division developed between the established Mexican American society and these new immigrants because many of those who had

⁵¹José E. Limón, *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican American South Texas* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 72.

⁵²Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 45.

⁵³Montejano, *Making of Texas*, 23.

⁵⁴Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

⁵⁵Foley, *White Scourge*, 6.

been in the country longer favored immigration restrictions, arguing that Mexican immigrants took away jobs and lowered wages.

Some Mexican Americans also began to embrace whiteness by using the terms Latin American and Spanish American as a way of separating themselves from the poor and often illiterate agricultural workers who were migrating from Mexico to the Southwest in the wake of the Mexican Revolution.⁵⁶ Jovita González undoubtedly was affected by these trends of her time and by a more personal romanticizing—and possibly invention—of upper class Spanish heritage in South Texas.

By her work with Dobie, her manner, and her separation of herself from the masses of Mexican Americans through her social class and education, González was able to create a degree of whiteness for herself. She portrayed herself as a middle-to upper-class Mexican American woman, and although in works like “Among My People”⁵⁷ she identified with the tellers of folktales in Mexican American culture alluded to in the title, she treated the lower class Mexican-Americans with a distinct air of condescension, always carefully pointing out differences in color and class between the “*gente decente*,” of which she saw herself as a member, and the lower class peons and *vaqueros* who often were the subject of her folklore. Although she titled one of her scholarly articles “Among My People,” literary critic Garza-Falcón points out that

[t]he South Texas Mexicans are González’s people ‘in the sense that she defends their history against common-place stereotypes; and then too they are not. She

⁵⁶Foley, *White Scourge*, 7.

⁵⁷Jovita González, “Among My People” in *Publications of the Texas Folklore Society* vol. 10, ed. J. Frank Dobie (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1932), 101.

writes about them from a distanced and sometimes even paternalistic viewpoint influenced by the ethnographic style that prevailed during the late 1920s and by the cultural climate at the University of Texas at Austin.⁵⁸

But this does not diminish the many areas in which she offered pioneering resistance in both her writing and in living a life that resisted the cultural norms of both Anglo and Mexican American society.

González was born in either 1899 or 1904 on a ranch near Roma, Texas, a fifth-generation descendent of a Spanish land grant family. She appears to have changed her birth year as she got older.⁵⁹ The year 1904 was a turning point for the Rio Grande Valley, because on July 4 of that year, the railroad line from Corpus Christi to Brownsville was completed. For the first time, the Rio Grande Valley was open to large-scale outside influence and to major land speculation.⁶⁰ Anglo ranchers played a large part in financing the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico railway, which connected Corpus Christi to Brownsville and to the Missouri Pacific Railroad system.⁶¹ This heralded the first massive settlement of Anglo farmers, who brought with them new ideas about race and began to institute segregationist policies.⁶² This also accelerated the large-scale land loss for Mexican Americans in the Rio Grande Valley as the traditional ranching culture was transformed into a modernizing farming culture. In the process,

⁵⁸Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 77.

⁵⁹Jovita González, Handwritten information concerning ancestry and early life in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 2, Folder 22 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

⁶⁰Cotera, *Native Speakers*, 106,

⁶¹Cotera, *Native Speakers*, 59.

⁶²Montejano, *Making of Texas*, 24.

many Mexican Americans moved from being either ranch owners or *vaqueros* to being laborers in a new system of peonage based largely on race.⁶³

González's father, a school teacher from the nearby town of Mier, an old Spanish settlement in Tamaulipas, Mexico, did not allow her to speak English at home.⁶⁴ The area in which she grew up is one of the most traditionally Mexican in South Texas, and the culture of her childhood was one she would later mine in her folklore studies. Her hometown of Roma is equidistant from Laredo and Brownville, about 100 miles from each. This part of the Mexican frontier was settled by Spanish land grant families who came north with José de Escandón in the 18th century. Escandón was made governor and captain general of Nuevo Santander in 1748 and founded Camargo, Reynosa, and Mier in the 1750s. The area around Roma and Rio Grande City, where González was born, was settled by followers of Escandón who came from Mier and founded a settlement called Corrales de Saenz in the mid-1760s.⁶⁵ Because this area was ranchland, it escaped to some extent the influx of farmers that invaded the Rio Grande Valley in the early to mid-20th century who settled near McAllen, Brownsville, and Harlingen to farm cotton and grow citrus. In the area around Roma and Rio Grande City, the land was dominated by ranchers, and as Montejano shows, in ranchland areas of South Texas traditional culture and political power structures persisted longer.⁶⁶ As historian Cotera puts it,

⁶³Montejano, *Making of Texas*, 74.

⁶⁴González, Handwritten information concerning ancestry and early life in Box 2, Folder 22.

⁶⁵González, Handwritten information concerning ancestry and early life in Box 2, Folder 22.

⁶⁶Montejano, *Making of Texas*, 72.

“These Anglo immigrants brought with them not only the hope for a new start in an unexploited territory, but also an understanding of race relations that was often at odds with the accommodating social relations that characterized the Anglo-Mexican ranching community of the late 19th century.”⁶⁷

Although Dobie and the contemporary press described González as descended from a family of wealthy Spanish landowners along the border,⁶⁸ her own writings indicate that González actually was from the middle class, at best. In her handwritten memoir, she says that her father was a native of Cadereyta Jiménez, Nuevo León, and that her grandfather taught poor boys the trade of hat making.⁶⁹ Her mother was from one of the original land grant families that settled South Texas and northern Mexico with José de Escandón.⁷⁰ In academic circles, she was portrayed with some of the same glamour as Rosita Fernández was as a singer—as an upper class woman separate from the working class Mexican. She did little to disabuse others of this notion and often added to it herself. She allowed herself to be described by Dobie as coming from a wealthy background, and although she performed works from her heritage before groups at conventions, she did so in a manner that separated her distinctly from the lower class

⁶⁷Cotera, *Native Speakers*, 106.

⁶⁸Garza-Falcón. *Gente Decente*, 74.

⁶⁹Jovita González, Information on ancestry and upbringing in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 1, Folder 22 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

⁷⁰Jovita González. Handwritten autobiography in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 1, Folder 21 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

peons and *vaqueros* about whom she wrote in her folklore, either romanticizing them or referring to them as half-breed mongrels with little education or manners.⁷¹

The family moved to San Antonio in 1910 so that she could receive proper schooling. “As a poor man, my father felt that the only heritage he could leave his children was an education,” she wrote.⁷² Though her father insisted on her speaking only Spanish at home, he wanted her to obtain a better education than she could get at a one-room school house on the San Ramon Ranch. After graduating from high school, she earned her teaching certificate and returned to South Texas to teach in Rio Grande City and Encinal because of financial problems. She earned a bachelor’s degree in Spanish from Our Lady of the Lake College in San Antonio and taught full-time at St. Mary’s Hall, an Episcopal girls’ school in San Antonio while working on her master’s in history at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). During the summer of 1929, she received a Lapham Fellowship to finance her research and gathered folklore among residents of the border counties of Webb, Zapata, and Starr, which comprised the basis of her master’s thesis.⁷³

González met the pre-eminent folklorist of the Southwest J. Frank Dobie at UT. He was to serve as a transformative influence in her life, although her master’s degree actually was history, not in English, which was Dobie’s field.⁷⁴ She said that before

⁷¹Limón, *Dancing with the Devil*, 62.

⁷²González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

⁷³González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

⁷⁴González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

meeting Dobie, she had thought that the legends and stories of the border were of interest only to her, but he showed her their importance and encouraged her to record and write about them.⁷⁵ With Dobie's backing, she was elected president of the Texas Folklore Society for two terms, from 1930 to 1932, and wrote in the society's annual publications beginning in 1927.⁷⁶ Her thesis director, Eugene C. Barker, a historian of Texas best known for his biography of Stephen F. Austin, initially did not want to approve the thesis because of its lack of historical references. He relented when Carlos E. Castañeda, a history professor who was an authority on Texas and Mexican history and an old family friend of González, said that the thesis would be used later as source material.⁷⁷ Barker commented that her thesis "was an interesting but somewhat odd piece of work."⁷⁸

In 1935 she married Edmundo E. Mireles, whom she had met at UT.⁷⁹ He was born in Parral, Chihuahua, Mexico, in 1905. This northern Mexican mining town became famous in 1923 when Pancho Villa was murdered there. Raised in Sacramento de Coahuila, Mexico, Mireles immigrated to San Antonio, Texas, with his father at the age of 13. He graduated from high school in San Antonio in 1926 and majored in linguistics at UT. He graduated from UT in 1931 and taught school in San Antonio. In

⁷⁵González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

⁷⁶González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

⁷⁷González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

⁷⁸González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

⁷⁹González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

1933, he took a position as principal of the newly-formed San Felipe School District, which had broken away from the Anglo school district in Del Rio. UT professor Castañeda recommended Mireles to become principal of the district, writing letters of reference to LULAC founder Alonso S. Perales and to Santos Garza, president of the San Felipe School Board.⁸⁰ Thus, the Mireleses became involved with activists who fought in one of the most important early desegregation lawsuits, *Savaterria v. Del Rio Independent School District*. While her husband served as principal, González was hired as an English teacher in the district.⁸¹

The district included a group of elite Mexican exiles fleeing the Mexican Revolution and who came from the same liberal tradition of Francisco Madero and Venustiano Carranza, the first revolutionary presidents of Mexico.⁸² Mireles's mother was the sister of Carranza, according to the couple's longtime housekeeper. González, on the other hand, remained a dedicated supporter of Porfirio Díaz.⁸³ The pair added to the culture of the district, forming a Latin Club and putting on *zarzuelas*, a form of operetta. González and Mireles remained in the district for four years; in 1939, the couple moved to Corpus Christi.⁸⁴

⁸⁰E. E. Mireles, Handwritten biographical information concerning E.E. Mireles in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 17, Folder 18 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

⁸¹Mireles, Handwritten biographical information concerning E.E. Mireles in Box 17, Folder 18.

⁸²Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 77.

⁸³Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 77.

⁸⁴Mireles, Handwritten biographical Information concerning E.E. Mireles in Box 17, Folder 18.

Mireles created and ran a Spanish language program in the Corpus Christi schools in the 1940s, for which *Time* magazine called him a “passionate protagonist for Texas bilingualism.”⁸⁵ Mireles created the Spanish language program at a time when teaching Spanish in grade schools not located on the border was still legally prohibited. He actually had to receive a special dispensation from the Texas Legislature to teach Spanish in the Corpus Christi schools. But the program was successful enough that the Texas Legislature passed a bill in 1941 allowing other schools to teach it.⁸⁶ In *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1936–1981*, Carlos Blanton points out that Mireles “sought no less than the rehabilitation of Spanish as a civilized and cultured tongue. He also set out to change the perception of Spanish-speaking children as uneducatable by instilling pride and accomplishment at their being bilingual.”⁸⁷ For Mireles, Spanish language instruction was about biculturalism as well as bilingualism. According to Blanton, the program that Mireles designed in many ways foreshadowed the goals of cultural affirmation and linguistic competence fostered by the bilingual education movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

Mireles and González wrote two sets of Spanish language textbooks together, and in 1952, Mireles received his master’s degree from the prestigious *Instituto*

⁸⁵“¿Habla Vd. Inglés?” *Time*, February 14, 1944.

⁸⁶Carlos K. Blanton. *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1936–1981* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 101.

⁸⁷Blanton, *Strange Career*, 103.

Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, in Monterrey, Mexico.⁸⁸ González taught Spanish and Texas history at W.B. Ray High School and became known in the community as an authority and speaker on Hispanic history and culture.⁸⁹ She died in 1983 of complications of diabetes.

Creating a Distinctive Borderlands Literature

González created a distinctive borderlands literature, first in her scholarship on border folklore done in the course of her graduate work at UT and then in the literature she wrote depicting the culture and conflicts of the Texas-Mexico border. Her novella, *Dew on the Thorn*, is a loosely woven piece of fiction compiled largely from her folklore research, and many stories related in the novella also show up in her published folklore. It looks at the process of Americanization and land and culture loss from the 1840s to the early 20th century.

In *Caballero*, she created a saga for the borderlands similar to the antebellum world and conflicts depicted in the old South of *Gone with the Wind*, which her letters indicate she was reading and re-reading at the time.⁹⁰ Like Margaret Mitchell, she focused on a dispossessed upper class invaded by outsiders they viewed as barbaric. She

⁸⁸Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, E.E. Mireles's Master's Diploma in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 16, Folder 17 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, 1952).

⁸⁹Mireles, Biographical information concerning E.E. Mireles in Box 17, Folder 18.

⁹⁰Jovita González. Correspondence between Jovita González and Margaret Eimer (Eve Raleigh) in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 1, Folder 6 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, 1942).

created a spirited female heroine, Susanita who—like Scarlett O’Hara—tried to adjust to the changing world around her and to the loss of her comfortable, traditional world in the wake of conquest. *Caballero* focuses on the world of the Mexican rancher in South Texas during the 1840s as the Rio Grande Valley was becoming a part of the United States and South Texas ranchers had to adjust to loss of land and power in the wake of the U.S.-Mexican War.⁹¹

González was one of the first to describe in detail the nature, landscape, and culture of the borderlands. She imbued the liminal space of the border world with a spirituality and a transcendence based on old indigenous myths, Spanish and Moorish folklore, and what she saw as the simple faith of the peons. The magical quality of the nature she depicts has a similar spiritual quality to that found in Alice Dickerson Montemayor’s paintings, where the century plants, the mesquite, the coyotes, and the untamed horses, become both signifiers of a unique place and culture and are marked with the wishes, dreams, and myths of a people. She finds beauty in a natural world that others see as a wasteland, describing it in loving detail and recognizing magic in the arid landscape. In *Dew on the Thorn* One, of González’s characters says the following:

The spirits are everywhere. If they are good spirits they select pleasant places – the *cenizo* in bloom, a grass-covered llano, a flower scented prairie. Have you

⁹¹Jovita González and Margaret Eimer, *Caballero* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 1, Folder 6 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.). González co-wrote the novel *Caballero* with Margaret Eimer, whom she met while they were both living in Del Rio. Little is known of Eimer, and it remains unclear when the two began the novel, though letters between them suggest the collaboration began between 1936 and 1938. In 1939, they signed a contract with the American Artists and Authors Agency agreeing to divide the proceeds from the novel equally. The book was published by Texas A&M University Press after González’s death: Jovita González and Margaret Eimer, *Caballero* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006).

heard the rustling sound that comes from a cornfield? Sometimes it is like the sigh of a sleeping child, again it sounds like the echo of distant voices. Did you think it is merely the wind? No, *comadre*, that was the distant spirits conversing with each other. Sometimes they prefer the room where a baby sleeps. Many times, when my Pedro was a baby, did I see him smiling in his sleep. No doubt he was playing with the spirit of a good soul.⁹²

The *peones*, in particular, she depicts as close to nature and God.

She then describes the faith of a simple shepherd and how he finds the magic of Christmas in the lonely landscape of South Texas:

It was evening in the pasture. The clear cold air had the sharpness of a Texas norther on a December night. The stars, like diamonds on a tapestry of black velvet, shone more brilliantly than ever, for they were awaiting the coming of the *El Niño Dios*, the godchild so sweet and tender. Tio Patricio and Cristóbal kept watch with the stars and sheep. The beauty of the night and the thought of day kept them quiet.⁹³

Tio Patricio says that he does not want to go to the main house for the Christmas celebration:

Because it is not like being under the stars. Waiting for the angels to sing I like to watch here, in the pasture until midnight on the Good Eve. The sky becomes silvery then, and the stars shine as they have never shone before. Everything hushes, and if you listen closely, you may even hear faintly but distinctly the singing of the angels in heaven.⁹⁴

The family on which *Caballero* centers, the Menodoza y Sorias, are people of the borderlands who see their geographical place as distinctive to their identity. They are an

⁹²Jovita González, "Chapter 4: Tio Patricio" in *Dew on the Thorn* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 52, Folder 1 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

⁹³González, "Tio Patricio," in Box 52, Folder 1.

⁹⁴Jovita González, "Chapter 8: The Good Eve" in *Dew on the Thorn* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 2, Folder 5 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

old Spanish land grant family who forged a life on the Rio Bravo in the 18th century to escape the control of Mexico City.⁹⁵ Here they built a hacienda that, by the 1840s, was a distinct mix of the Mexican interior and the frontier.

“They brought in palm trees and grape roots to form an arbor, around a patio. They brought the famous tile of Puebla over the mountains by muleback. And Sabine wood from the Rio Sabinas, and a bell from the old house in Mexico that had been brought from Spain. There were weapons displayed, upon which many a Moor had been impaled. Family oil paintings from which forbears stared gloomily. Mahogany chairs and tables and a gilt harp, relics of grandeur in Spain.”⁹⁶ But there were also products of the ranch: “furniture made of sticks and rawhide, and spurs and quirts hanging from the wall and bridles of leather exquisitely tooled and trimmed with silver. On the floor, a *reata* of rawhide coiled like a snake beside a string of bells.”⁹⁷

Dew on the Thorn relates the traditions of a similar land grant family about 60 years later than *Caballero*, in which the Olivares family still is clinging to the old ways in the face of the onslaught of American culture:

Rich in the traditions of a proud past, and still rich in worldly goods, the year of Our Lord 1904 found the Olivareses in the land which His Excellency, Revilla Gigedo, Viceroy of New Spain, had deeded to the family in 1764 Yet in spite of their long permanency in the country, this family, as was true of all border families, remained more Spanish and more Mexican than if they had lived in Mexico. A series of unfortunate circumstances had made the Olivareses’ cling

⁹⁵González and Eimer, *Caballero: A Historical Novel*, 6.

⁹⁶González and Eimer, *Caballero: A Historical Novel*, 8.

⁹⁷Jovita González and Margaret Eimer. “Chapter 1” in *Caballero* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 54, Folder 13 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

tenaciously to the traditions of their people, had also made them look on all Americans with dislike and distrust.⁹⁸

González often spoke of the persistence of Spanish and Mexican culture and how it was strengthened by isolation and conflict. She traced much of the folklore and customs of the border to old Spanish and even Moorish traditions. In both her novels and folklore, she detailed border customs, religion, superstition, songs and rhyme. The plot and characters in *Dew on the Thorn* are weak literary constructs that allow her to relate the folk customs and tales that so fascinate her. She talks about the *naciemientos*, (manger scenes) that families built at Christmas, containing plants and animals from many climates, from macaws to pine trees. She tells of the songs sung in the Christmas *posadas*, and describes the piñatas that the children gleefully broke on Christmas. She also addresses more obscure holidays, such as St. John's Day, when the girls would place their long hair on a mesquite block and cut it in remembrance of the saint's beheading, believing that if it were cut on that holy day it would grow four times faster.

The saint day of John the Baptist was also a time for taking ritual baths and for bathing the face in dew to make for a more beautiful complexion. It was a time when lovers would declare themselves to one another. González describes a young woman

⁹⁸Jovita González, "Chapter 1: The Family of the Olivareses" in *Dew on the Thorn* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 52, Folder 16 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

watching from her window for her lover to come to profess his love, participating in an old Spanish custom but surrounded by the nature of South Texas.⁹⁹

She remained at the window, watching the night mists float across the maguey fence-now like silvery wings, now as the gauzy veils of an oriental girl dancing-they glided across, now it seemed as though they might be lost in the thorny leaves of the century plants, but no, they floated by unmolested like happy spirits in a heaven of their own.¹⁰⁰

She writes of how one of the original Spanish settlers brought leaves from the *albahaca* (basil plant), from Spain to Texas, a symbol of how the settlers protected the old culture and centered their lives around it. “This made him feel as though a little corner of his home had been transplanted to the new world. He put a pile of stones around the plants to protect them from the wild animals, and when he decided to stay, he built his house right where the seeds had sprung. And since then we have always had *albahaca* growing at the Olivareño.”¹⁰¹

She describes poetically the distinctive nature and climate of the border and how the customs of Spain and the indigenous world of Mexico were combined to deal with the harshness of the climate, which often made life so challenging for border ranchers.

Spring came, and with it, new hope, But whatever young green thing sprang up, it died for need of water. The mesquites were mere ghosts, the huisaches, shameful for not bearing their sweet-smelling leaves, hid their blooms. All the water holes dried up, and death and starvation ruled the prairie. The buzzard was lord of the plains and as it flew over the trees, was a constant reminder of death.

⁹⁹Jovita González, “Chapter 6: St. John’s Day” in *Dew on the Thorn* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 52, Folder 3 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

¹⁰⁰González, “St. John’s Day” in Box 52, Folder 3.

¹⁰¹González, “The Family of the Olivareses” in Box 52, Folder 16.

All vegetation had been killed by the *hielo prieto*, and even the cactus, the always reliable food for the cattle, had wilted.¹⁰²

So the people organized a procession to bring rain, carrying the *Santo Nino de Atocha*, a version of the Christ child popular on the border. The statue was clothed in a 16th century brown cloak, carried a shepherd's crook and a basket of fruit and flowers, and wore the plumed cap of a conquistador. But it was an Indian peon, Ambrosio, who sang an ancient Aztec rain song that actually brought the rain.

The next few days were days of magic at the ranch and in the pastures. The huisaches, now a mass of golden velvet, scattered showers of fragrant pollen and the cactus converted the pastures into a chaotic symphony of yellow bronze and crimson. It was at times like this that Ambrosio became a poet and told myths of remote times when the Indians were lords of the land and the gods walked freely among them.¹⁰³

In her work, the periphery becomes unquestionably the center. She gives no bow of acknowledgment to events in the larger world, and Washington, D. C., and New York City do not figure in at all, while San Antonio, Monterrey, and Mexico City are mere footnotes. The world outside of the borderlands often is depicted as strange and surreal as described by returning wanderers who experienced it and then shared their tales of a strange outside world with their neighbors on the border. For González, it is on the borderlands where the conflicts that are intriguing matter-where the stories are.

She treats the wildlife and plants of the borderlands as normative. She does not explain plant names that might seem exotic even in other parts of Texas, and the wildlife

¹⁰²Jovita González, "Chapter 7" in *Dew on the Thorn* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 17, Folder 4 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

¹⁰³González, "Chapter 7" in *Dew* manuscript in Box 17, Folder 4.

and landscapes which are so unique come through powerfully in her writing. Often she only gives the Spanish name for a plant or animal or uses a particular South Texas usage like “tank,” which is a common term for a pond. She describes the landscape without taking into account the lack of familiarity outsiders might have.

“The sun, a ball of orange pink descended down the horizon at one stride and a soft cooling breeze, the pulmotor (a respiratory apparatus for pumping oxygen or air into and out of the lungs) of the borderland, sprang from the east,” she wrote in *Dew on the Thorn*.

Down in the *cañada* (cane brake), which ran by the ranch, the doves were cooing and the redbirds in the cottonwood tree by the dirt ‘tank’ began to sing. From the corrals came the voices of the vaqueros singing and jesting and blended with the bleating of the goats and sheep were the whistles and hisses of the *pastor*. The still garrulous stridulations of locusts completed the chorus of evening noises.¹⁰⁴

Since González traced her own ancestry back to one of the old land grant families, her fiction sometimes seems to be about the values and culture of her own family—or the upper-class values and culture she wished they had had. Her grandfather bought a ranch, *Los Viboras*, that she said was part of the land lost by her ancestors with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. “Fearing the reprisals of the new conquerors, most of the colonizers on the Texas side crossed the Rio Grande to be among their kinsmen in Mexico. One of my ancestors, Don José Alejandro Guerra had been surveyor to the crown.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴González, “Chapter 7” in *Dew* manuscript in Box 17, Folder 4.

¹⁰⁵González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

In *Dew on the Thorn*, she describes the traditional life of one old border family, trying as much as it could to live as though they were still in Spain:

“In a bend on the Rio Grande, in the heart of the Texas brush land nestles a sleepy little town. Its white stone and adobe houses enclosed by walls. Its narrow, dusty winding streets, the mosque-like tower gave it the appearance of an oriental town. With its showers of sand that prick and burn like sharp needles of steel, and a tropical sun which hurls its angry rays at the unfortunate inhabitants, it could be an oasis town of the Sahara. But the nights!! Glorious – silvery – a limpid sky shimmering with the glittering jewels of the gods. Here lived, years ago, two families of old and aristocratic lineage. Their ancestors, impoverished grandees from Spain, had come many generations past to the new world hoping to fill their empty coffers with the gold and silver of the Indies. Time passed and the descendants, now Texans, had no love for the country across the sea. However, they kept the traditions of the mother country and when the land passed from Mexico to the United States, both families clung more tenaciously than ever to what they called ‘the customs and language of God.’ They shut themselves up in their big houses, seeing no one, remembering and living over the past glories of their ancestors. High walls hid the houses from the gaze of the common folk and all that could be seen from the street were the tops of palm trees and the pomegranates in bloom.”¹⁰⁶

As in *Caballero*, in *Dew on the Thorn*, González describes a distinctive borderlands house with its combination of the frontier and the old traditions of Spain.

The principal room of the house was a big *sala*, the living room, where the family sat and talked in the evenings. Here, cane chairs, wide and low, and cushioned rockers with friendly arms extended, offered their welcome to friends and relatives. Deer, wildcat and coyote skins took the place of rugs; mounted deer heads, powder horns and hunting guns added to the rustic simplicity and charm. ... And from a built-in niche, lit by crude hand-made copper candlesticks smiled benignly the Christ child. Only the daughters had their room in the house proper. When the sons came to be of age, their rooms were in the men’s quarters in a nearby building. The kitchen and dining room, which formed a separate establishment, were joined to the house by a long rambling portal. Under its

¹⁰⁶Jovita González, “Chapter 12: The Last of the Mendozas” in *Dew on the Thorn* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 52, Folder 8 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

friendly shade hung Don Francisco's saddles, his spurs, the horse-hair lariats and the rawhide braided quirts.¹⁰⁷

Meals also were a combination of Mexican interior customs and those of the frontier. She described a Mexican American ranch family meal in *Dew on the Thorn* like this:

It was four o'clock by the kitchen clock and the shadow the sundial projected. The meal was served to the two men under the portal, on a long home-made mesquite table covered with a red and white tablecloth. A neat brown-faced maid brought them platters of ranch delicacies—flour tortillas, pastry rich with powdered sugar and cinnamon, fresh corn muffins, cheese made that morning, pumpkin pies, and newly roasted coffee with the fragrant flavor of the tropics.¹⁰⁸

But this pastoral, spiritual world cannot remain intact. Into this old world of the borderlands comes a conqueror with very different values, the new American invader. In the fictional world that González builds, based in part on tales told to her by her own family and by those she interviewed for folklore research, Mexican Americans despised the new Anglo conquerors, viewing them as barbarous, uneducated and enemies of Catholicism.

It is in her views of the Americans that she parts most sharply with Dobie, and her thesis director Barker, offering up a counter history that is truly subversive. She presents an alternative to a history that has depicted Mexicans as lazy, ignorant, half-breeds, in thrall to a corrupt priesthood and Pope. In the traditional Anglo dominated narrative, Anglos are depicted as bearers of all that is good in Protestant, British

¹⁰⁷González, "The Last of the Mendozas" in Box 52, Folder 8.

¹⁰⁸González, "Chapter 7" in *Dew* manuscript in Box 17, Folder 4.

America, bringing civilization to a people who were little more than savages.¹⁰⁹ But González reminds readers that not all Mexicans are immigrants and many Anglos are. In both works of fiction, she rewrites ideas of banditry, showing that those whom Anglo historians had termed bandits often were actually heroic resisters—landowners protecting their sense of nationhood and honor.¹¹⁰

Her concepts of origins depart markedly from the Texas historians of the 1920s and 1930s, as Cotera points out her introduction to González's 1930 thesis "Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties."¹¹¹ For the traditional Anglo historians under whom González was studying, like her thesis director Barker, Texas history began with the settlement of Texas by Moses Austin, and with the Texas Revolution. The founding fathers were the early settlers and the heroes of the Alamo, and Texas history began with Stephen F. Austin, Sam Houston, and Davy Crockett.

For González, Texas history began with Jose de Escandón and the Spanish land grant families he brought to settle Texas almost 100 years before the Anglos arrived. Far from being barbarians, they were heirs to a great civilization, their Catholicism and their Spanish nationality at least the equal if not superior background to that of English

¹⁰⁹Walter Prescott Webb set the tone for a discourse that excluded Mexicans from the historical portrayal of the settlement of the West as being a clash between the savage "other" (nature, Mexicans, and Indians) and dominant white maleness in his two books *Great Plains* (Boston, MA: Ginn and Co., 1931) and the *Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1935). It was writers like Webb who came to construct popular notions about Anglo dominance in Texas. Leticia Garza-Falcón has argued that the language employed by Webb, Dobie, Barker, and others has created a rhetoric of dominance that made the annihilation and oppression of Indians and Mexicans seem natural.

¹¹⁰Jovita González, "Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1930).

¹¹¹González, *Life along the Border*, 16.

settlers. She begins her thesis with the settlement of South Texas by Spanish land grant families and talks about separatist political movements like the Wars of Federation, the Carbajal Rebellion and the Cortina Rebellion that provide a counter history that shows the Texas Revolution to be part of a history of rebellion against the Mexican government rather than a single heroic rebellion by Anglos against their Mexican oppressors.¹¹²

In a discarded first chapter of *Dew on the Thorn* found in her archive, she wrote about a Mexican landowner, Don Cesario, who is just as nationalistic and provincial as the Americans are, seeing his own religion as superior and dismissing the English vice-admiral Sir Francis Drake as a pirate and Henry VIII as an adulterer. Her portrayal of Don Cesario seems to be a way of poking fun at provincial American attitudes. As Don Cesario ponders the invading *americanos*, he says this:

These men who were heretics would not come to Christian territory. One of his ancestors, if he remembered it right, a captain of a Spanish galleon, had been killed by the English pirate, Drake. Not only were they enemies of Spain but they had dared to oppose the Pope. And all because he would not allow their king to have more than one wife. And if history were true, the King's lawful wife had been a Spanish princess. Ah these *Americanos* had a deathly heritage. They were the born enemies of the Mexicans. Certainly, God, who was a Catholic, would not allow these people who were his enemies to take the land away from them.¹¹³

Don Cesario's foreman is killed when he tells an American settler seeking land that the ranch land belongs to Don Cesario. The American replies, "Let that be a lesson to you Mexicans. That is how we deal with anyone who opposes us, and unless you

¹¹²González, *Life along the Border*, 9.

¹¹³Jovita González. "Chapter 1: A Patriarch at Home" in *Dew on the Thorn* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 52, Folder 13 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

leave the country, you shall be treated to the same.” Don Cesario is forced by the Anglos to leave Texas, and because of his great love for his homeland, leaving Texas kills him. So his widow takes charge of the ranch, their three children and the fatherless peons. She raises her son to hate the Americans, telling him, “When you are a man you are bound to meet the enemies of your family. When that happens there is only one thing for you to do –Kill- and kill without compassion. Spare no one.”¹¹⁴

González was given a similar, though less violent, lesson in ethnic pride from her own family. She remembered visiting her great grandmother, Ramoncita.

I have a clear picture of her lying in a four-poster bed, her clear-cut ivory features contrasting with her dark sharp eyes. ‘Come closer to me children, so I can see you better,’ she said. ‘Your mother tells me you are moving to live in San Antonio. Did you know that land at one time belonged to us? But now the people living there don’t like us. They say we don’t belong there and must move away. Perhaps they will tell you to go to Mexico where you belong. Don’t listen to them. Texas is ours! Texas is our home. Always remember those words. Texas is ours. Texas is our home.’ I have always remembered those words and always felt at home in Texas.¹¹⁵

González points out that often the Mexican was a foreigner in his own land, though he did not always realize the truth of this in the Mexican-dominated Rio Grande Valley. In *Dew on the Thorn*, she wrote,

It was said of Don Francisco that he was so busy being busy that he had no time for work. For when he was not riding with his *caporal*, he was arranging a hunt, a cockfight, a rodeo or attending the races in town. Thus lived Don Francisco, in the midst of this rural splendor, enjoying life to the fullest, never realizing that he was a foreigner in his own land.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴González, “A Patriarch at Home” in Box 52, Folder 13.

¹¹⁵González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

¹¹⁶González, “The Family of the Olivareses” in Box 52, Folder 15.

Her depiction of Dobie's pioneers is hardly complimentary. They are portrayed as greedy hypocrites and looters who did evil and justified it with their religion. For González, Webb and Dobie's heroic pioneers become something very different.

The fugitive ... the land greedy who justified their rapaciousness with the word 'pioneer' and used it as a blanket to cover their evils. 'Remember the Alamo,' they shouted and visited the sins of Sana Ana upon all his countrymen and considered themselves justified in stealing the land of the Mexicans; Some built themselves a house of righteousness like a snail builds his shell and carries it to him. 'The Mexicans are Papists, Catholics who worship idols, and pray to a woman they call the Blessed Virgin'. They pillaged and stole and insulted and called themselves the soul of the avenging God. And shouted their hymns to drown their consciousness.¹¹⁷

Caballero offers a similar critique, showing a Mexican family with utter contempt for the invading conquerors, who are viewed as uncultured and without religion. The patriarch of the Mendoza y Sorias forbids the family from going to Mass because an American soldier was spotted in the church and might look at his daughters, but his sister insists that they attend, asking "Do we hide from our inferiors?"¹¹⁸

At a night meeting in which Mexican ranchers are plotting revenge against the American invaders, one man, tall and thin with aristocratic features, describes his encounter with an American:

The gringos forced me at the point of a pistol to sell my racehorses, and when I demanded my money the leader of them struck me on the face with a quirt. 'This

¹¹¹Jovita González, "Chapter 11: Distant Rumbling" in *Dew on the Thorn* Manuscript in Box 52, Folder 6. in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 52, Folder 6 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

¹¹²González and Eimer, "Chapter 5" in *Caballero* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 55, Folder X (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

is good pay for a Mexican,' he jeered and his friends laughed. Struck me on the face! Me, Don Pablo de los Oliveros! Whose great grandfather was knighted by the King of Spain, whose grandfather surveyed this territory for his most Catholic majesty, whose father was honored by the viceroy Revilla Gigedo. I swear eternal vengeance on them and their descendants. I swear war to the death.¹¹⁹

The Texas Rangers are depicted as brutal, ruthless killers and ignorant American land grabbers try to take the ranch of Don Santiago, saying there were no markers on it. Red McClane, an American who eventually marries into the Mendoza y Soria family, creates a political machine that controls the vote of the Mexican American community.¹²⁰

In a meeting to plan a rebellion in which Juan Cortina is present, González has a fictionalized Cortina say, "They call the Rio Bravo, or the Rio Grande, as they name it, the boundary. I will do what I can to color the big river red—with their blood."¹²¹ When one in the group urges them to respect the new American laws, Mexican rancher Don Jose Carabal replies "What laws are these, now that Texas has given up its independence? What laws are there for us from a nebulous stranger who is president of the United States? Our protector now, so we are told."¹²²

¹¹³González and Eimer, "Chapter 5" in *Caballero* manuscript in Box 55, Folder X.

¹¹⁴González and Eimer, "Chapter 5" in *Caballero* manuscript in Box 55, Folder X.

¹²⁰González and Eimer, "Chapter 5" in *Caballero* manuscript in Box 55, Folder X.

¹²¹González and Eimer, "Chapter 5" in *Caballero* manuscript in Box 55, Folder X.

¹²²González and Eimer, "Chapter 5" in *Caballero* manuscript in Box 55, Folder X.

In González's world, Mexicans who tried to become Americans often failed. In *Dew on the Thorn*, the ranch owner's son, Fernando, finds that he is not accepted by American society. "I was prepared to become an American, but instead of that I am determined to remain what I always have been, a Mexican and a gentleman." He urged those in his community to learn their rights as American citizens and to learn English, not because they are ashamed of their heritage but to protect themselves from the snares and wiles of Americans.¹²³

González also depicted Catholicism in a way counter to the dominant narrative of heroic Protestants civilizers. While Castañeda published a multi-volume book on the Catholic heritage of Texas for a Centennial project for the Knights of Columbus, González worked on articles that she planned to turn into a book on Texas women Catholics, many of whom were Mexican American, even discussing the romances between Mexican American women and Anglo men, relationships she said were instrumental in "creating border magnificence and hospitality."¹²⁴ She put on a special display of photographs and biographies for the Diocese of Dallas's Catholic exhibit *Catholic Heroines of Texas* and published some of her articles in *The Catholic Weekly* in

¹²³Jovita González, "The New Leader" in *Dew on the Thorn* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 52, Folder 9 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

¹²⁴Jovita González, *Henry Clay Davis and María Hilaria de la Garza* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 60, Folder 7 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

San Antonio. *The Southern Messenger* published a condensation of these magazine articles that she had planned to make into a book.¹²⁵

Some of the women she depicts as heroic resisters, in articles that act as a critique of Anglo triumphalism. She writes of Dona Patricia de la Garza de León: “She was to taste the bitter dregs of that basest of human failings, ingratitude, for the state she loved so well after its independence unjustly and without reason branded her and her people as aliens and confiscated most of her broad possessions, until in her old days she saw her wealth gone and her lands taken from her.”¹²⁶

Although González studied with Dobie, their views of Texas history were not always similar and she would not take a formal class with him. “You see, it was an agreement that we made, that I would not go not go into one of his classes because I would be mad at many things. He would take the Anglo Saxon side, naturally, and I would take the Spanish and Mexican side.”¹²⁷

In fact, her novel *Caballero* was so controversial that her husband said in an interview with historian Cotera that he and his wife had actually burned the manuscript, realizing it would not be acceptable to the Anglo-dominated world. However, González

¹²⁵Jovita González, “Texas Women Heroines” manuscript and magazine clippings in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 60, Folder 1 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

¹²⁶González, “Texas Women Heroines” in Box 60, Folder 1.

¹²⁷James McNutt, “Beyond Regionalism: Texas Folklorists and the Emergence of a Post-Regionalist Consciousness” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 1982), 250–251.

indicated by a subtle gesture to Coteria that this was not the case,¹²⁸ and Coteria went on to oversee publication of the manuscript after González's death. It was finally published by Texas A&M Press in 2006.¹²⁹

Coteria has argued that González's work is not only subversive, but that her thesis was a point-by-point rebuttal of John Gregory Bourke 1894 tract, "In the American Congo," an ethnographic study of the area around González's hometown of Roma from the time Bourke was stationed in the area as an army officer. His work depicted the "natives" of the area as being primitive, lazy, and highly superstitious.¹³⁰

Patriarchy, the Class System, and the Idealization of Whiteness

Although González's fiction celebrates and romanticizes Mexican culture, it also offers a sharp critique of several aspects of Mexican American life. She is particularly critical of the patriarchy which framed Mexican border life, and she provides a weaker but still significant critique of the class system in Mexican American society while showing the prejudice and narrowness the elite Mexicans had for darker-skinned ranch workers.

¹²⁸María Eugenia Coteria, Introduction to *Caballero: A Historical Novel* by Jovita González and Eve Raleigh, eds. María Eugenia Coteria and José E. Limón (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), xviii.

¹²⁹González and Raleigh, *Caballero: A Historical Novel*, 51.

¹³⁰María E. Coteria, "Refiguring the American Congo: Jovita González, John Gregory Bourke, and the Battle over Ethno Historical Representations of the Borderlands," *Western American Literature* 35, no. 1 (2000): 80.

She unflinchingly portrays the cruelty of the patriarch in *Caballero*, Don Santiago, writing about the whipping of a servant until he is almost dead. She also describes in detail Don Santiago's contempt for and cruelty towards his artistic son, Luis Gongaza, and the destruction he wreaked on the spirit of his wife. Don Santiago worships his brutal son Alvaro, who though heroically joining Cortina to fight the Americans, is a violent man and an insensitive womanizer, unkind even to his own sisters and mother, seeing power as the only good.

The women in the book are depicted as having a great deal of agency. The favorite daughter, Susanita, falls in love and eventually marries an American soldier. While most ranchers did not allow their daughters to ride at all, much less at night unaccompanied and with a lower class man, she also breaks this convention to ride alone with a peon at night in order to reach Matamoros to save her brother Alvaro from hanging. Susanita also goes alone to the army barracks to plead for her brother and attends his trial. For this shocking and unconventional behavior, her father banishes her from the hacienda because she has destroyed the family honor with her daring actions.

Her sister, María de los Angeles, also exhibits great independence in her fight against her father to become a nun, when he shows only contempt for her vocation. Like Susanita, María eventually marries an American, against their father's wishes. Their friend, Inéz, refuses their brother Alvaro's proposal, although he would have been an appropriate suitor because of background and family ties. Instead, Inéz also marries an American.

Doña Dolores, Don Santiago's widowed sister who lives with the family, constantly opposes and insults her brother, and eventually shocks the family by marrying a neighbor and family friend, absolutely unheard of for a woman of 40. Even old Paz, the long-suffering housekeeper, eventually runs off to be with her son, who is working for Americans in Matamoros. Only Petronilla, Don Santiago's wife, has been so completely annihilated by his dominance that she shows no independence.

Over and over, it is made clear by the characters how much better it is to be married to an American than a Mexican, because the Americans show more deference to their wives' wishes, grant them more freedom, and do not force them to always be surrounded by a covey of women.

Inéz tells her friend Clara, "Being a wife and a mother and being called Doña is everything to you. You see a man as something to bring you all these things and not really something personal at all. I am not that way.' She struck her breast. 'I am me inside here.'"¹³¹

González offers a weaker critique of other aspects of the Mexican landowning class. Hers is traditional world in which the superior attitudes of the Spanish elite about race and class are distant from the Chicano ethos of *mestizaje* and glorification of the indigenous. In fact, when her husband told Coteria that the manuscript to Caballero had been burned because it would have been so offensive to Anglos, he also pointed out that

¹³¹González and Eimer, "Chapter 5" in *Caballero* manuscript in Box 55, Folder X.

it would have been unacceptable to the Chicanos of the 1970s.¹³² Though her critique of the invading Americans and of Mexican patriarchy is strong, her criticism of her own society's attitudes towards class and race are not nearly as pointed. In the social system depicted by González, light skin, blond hair, and Spanish customs are preferable, and the Spanish families who populate her fiction settled the Mexican frontier area with the distinct purpose of wiping out the barbarous Indians. She writes frequently of the savagery of Indians, without offering any counterpoint, and of their half-breed descendants, the *vaqueros* and peons, whom she seldom displays as anything but simple and often simple-minded.

She describes this attitude when she writes of Don Cesario in *Dew on the Thorn*:

He liked to feel that he had brought to this out of the way corner of the Spanish empire, the culture and civilization of the Spanish race. Sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by *peones* and *vaqueros*, he traversed the wild Indian country with the same facility as though he were traversing the plains drained by the Guadalquivir of his native Sevilla.¹³³

And no irony is detectable when she discusses the beauty of Susanita and other women who are white-skinned, light-eyed, and blonde. The whiteness is seen as superior and desirable by Don Santiago's family, and she offers no critique of this. She describes how Don Santiago admires his favorite daughter's beauty. He marveled at the "spun-gold fineness and sheen of his heritage from his Asturian ancestors, already so rare among his people that it seems a gift from heaven. Lovely was the cream skin, delicate

¹³²González and Eimer, *Caballero: A Historical Novel*, 9.

¹³³González, "The Family of the Olivareses" in Box 52, Folder 16.

the molding of the red lips. And her eyes were like limpid green water upon which a vagrant cloud left a remembrance of gray.”¹³⁴

She describes a character in *Dew on the Thorn* in a similar fashion, as possessing the beauty and charm of her Spanish forbears. The oval of her expressive, olive tinted face was startlingly set against a frame of auburn hair, inherited no doubt, from some distant Asturian ancestor. Often on moonlit nights, the two young people could be heard singing in the garden, now ballads from old Spain, which told the loves of Moorish princes and Spanish knights, now “*Cielito Lindo*” or “*Adelita*.”¹³⁵

González looks upon the manners and customs of the upper class with admiration. She often compares the southern gentility to the aristocratic Spanish families of the border, and Susanita marries into an old wealthy southern family. The lower-class whites are depicted without sympathy or admiration. González makes clear her respect for the southern gentility and the commonalities they share with the border ranchers, intermarrying and understanding each other as gentle folk. It is the white trash that she believes did much to destroy Mexican society in Texas when the Rio Grande Valley was inundated with white farmers from the Midwest in the early 20th century. “We Texas Mexicans of the border, although we hold onto our traditions and are proud of our race, are loyal to the United States, in spite of the treatment we receive by some of the new Americans,” González wrote. “Before their arrival, there were no social or racial distinctions among us. But since the coming of the ‘white trash,’ from the north and

¹³⁴Jovita González and Margaret Eimer, “Chapter 1” in *Caballero* manuscript in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 54, Folder 15 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

¹³⁵González, “The Last of the Mendozas” in Box 52, Folder 12.

middle west, we felt the change. They made us feel for the first time that we were Mexicans and they considered themselves our superiors.”¹³⁶

During the period in which she wrote, poor whites were being marginalized in the South while immigrant Jews, Slavs, Italians, and Irish were ‘becoming white’ in the urban areas of the East. Poor whites in Texas and the cotton South were going in the opposite direction, losing whiteness and the privileges that whiteness bestowed, Neil Foley wrote in *The White Scourge*. One mid-20th century novelist said that cotton was the scourge of southern society because it provided subsistence for lowly blacks, peonized Mexicans, and moronic whites, enabling them to reproduce their “hideous kind” and populate the cotton belt with “America's worthless human silt.”¹³⁷

Foley points out that Anglo constructions of whiteness in Texas seldom included those of Mexican ancestry and then only if they were high on the social scale, such as large landowners.¹³⁸ “I would not mind Jim Crowing the filthy Mexicans, but I would not Jim Crow a Mexican if he was educated and nearer the white race,” he quotes one farmer as saying.¹³⁹

Jovita González took on this attitude of contempt for poor whites, while embracing middle class whiteness like many of her Mexican American generation did.

¹³⁶Jovita González, Handwritten ancestral and autobiographical information in the E.E. Mireles and Jovita González de Mireles Papers, Box 22, Folder 2 (Corpus Christi, TX: Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, n.d.).

¹³⁷Foley, *White Scourge*, 23.

¹³⁸Foley, *White Scourge*, 24.

¹³⁹Foley, *White Scourge*, 41.

For González, it is likely that she felt her respect, even her survival, as a scholar, educator, and creative writer depended upon a certain amount of assimilation. She almost certainly felt she had to appropriate certain aspects of whiteness to gain respect and acceptance, both in Anglo society and in her own Mexican American world, where citizenship and middle class Americanized manners were respected by the Mexican American generation.

In her fiction, González shows contempt for the white lower class and combines the hierarchical views of color and class that are a legacy of the Spanish conquest with southern ideas about poor whites. She offers little criticism of a society with a strong class system based on race, skin color, and property, in which the aristocratic Mexican families are naturally drawn to the aristocratic southern families that settle Texas, while the Indians are little more than primitive violent enemies. In González's world, the mestizo *peones* who work as loyal retainers on the ranch are viewed with a blend of romanticism and contempt, and the white trash rather than the upper class whites are usually the ones guilty of mistreating Mexicans. She views her own culture as similar to that of the old South, a culture to be preserved. Like the Old South, she sees the Spanish descended families as finer and more cultured than their conquerors. In both the case of the old South and the Mexican borderlands, she views the conquerors as little more than barbarian invaders bent on destroying old traditions and tearing down a culture of grace and refinement. In the old South, the conquered rebelled in guerilla groups, like the Ku Klux Klan just as the border denizens joined Cortina. She saw the old southern culture as

worthy of blending with the elite Mexican ranchers, and in *Caballero*, the heroine marries a southern gentleman who has arrived with the invading U.S. Army.

González's border is not the border of militant Chicanos of the 1970s. It is a borderland defined by a romanticizing of the upper-class Mexican landowner and of the landed elite of the plantation owner in the old south, which in *Caballero* are brought together by marriage, the two groups united by a shared understanding of the finer things in life and storied traditions and customs. Even the title, *Caballero*, means gentleman or knight. The influence of Margaret Mitchell is evident as the large Mendoza ranch with its rambling house is Tara-like, and just as the southerners travel to Atlanta or Savannah for balls and parties, so do the Mendoza y Sorias travel to Matamoros for their winter social season.

In the description of the protagonist, Don Santiago, it is made clear at the outset that he is an aristocrat. González describes his "clear cut features, his hawk-like high bridged nose, eyes like polished coal under the protective lintel of eyebrows as straight as the firm thin-lipped mouth, which could only be chiseled by generations of noble forebears"¹⁴⁰

González offers a mild critique of Don Santiago's treatment of his peons, some of whom leave the ranch to join the American system of capitalism and receive decent wages and more freedom. The same pattern is depicted in *Dew on the Thorn*, as peons find they can make more working for an American in a week than a Mexican in a day. In general, however, she depicts the peons as compliant, ignorant, brown people with

¹⁴⁰González, "Chapter 1" in *Caballero* manuscript in Box 54, Folder 14.

charming superstitions who know little beyond loyalty to the master. In this, they are similar to slaves in *Gone with the Wind*. None of the peon characters is as developed as that of the powerful ranch family. In *Dew on the Thorn*, González explains—in what at first seems like sympathy—what she describes as a “hopelessness and inherited debt.” She writes, “Since the *peones* received very small remuneration for their work, they were always in debt to Don Francisco. ... Don Francisco had a general store at the ranch where the *peones* could buy all they needed from patent medicines to calico.” But then she goes on, “The existence of such conditions does not imply that Don Francisco was cruel or unjust. The customs were merely part of a system that had been inherited by both classes. Neither one nor the other knew of a better plan; the unfairness and injustice of it was never realized by the master, and the *peones* looked upon it as a thing that had to be.”¹⁴¹

She also points out that Don Francisco did not work with his hands. “Characteristically Spanish, he did not perform any of the manual work himself. During sheepshearing time, when a thousand or more head of sheep were to be sheared or when calves were marked or cattle branded, he supervised the work.”¹⁴²

Her description of peons and the class system is one very different from that described by Americo Paredes, who viewed border society as more egalitarian. “The simple pastoral life fostered by most Border people fostered a natural equality among men,” Paredes wrote.

¹⁴¹González, “The Patriarch at Home” in Box 52, Folder 13.

¹⁴²González, “The Patriarch at Home” in Box 52, Folder 13.

Much has been written about the democratizing influence of the horse culture. More important was that on the border, the landowner lived and worked upon his land. There was almost no gap between the owner and his cowhand, who often was related to him anyway. The simplicity of the life led by both employer and employee also helped make them feel they were not different kinds of men, even if one was richer than the other.¹⁴³

“Peon” in Nuevo Santander, the Spanish province that would become South Texas, had preserved much of its old meaning of “man on foot,” he continued.

The gap between the peon and the vaquero was not extreme, although the man on horseback had the job with more prestige, one which was considered to involve more danger and more skill. The peon however, could and did rise in the social scale. People along the border who like to remember genealogies and study family trees can tell of instances in which a man came to the border as a peon ... and ended his life as a vaquero, while his son began life as a vaquero and ended it as a small landowner, and the grandson married into the old family that had employed his ... the whole process taking place before the Madero revolution.¹⁴⁴

The border class system that González describes is not nearly as fluid and is dominated by a cultivated upper class with Spanish customs. This was the image in which she wanted to remake herself, as descended from an aristocratic land grant family, and her portrayal of these families seems in part of be a building up of her own image, both to herself and to the outside world.

Garza-Falcón takes issue with González’s depiction of an aristocratic border class. “Her description still begs the question, what aristocrats? Where in this brush country is there anyone who wants to eat but does not work? One would be hard pressed

¹⁴³Americo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1971), 10.

¹⁴⁴Paredes, *Pistol in His Hand*, 11.

even among land-owning families to find aristocrats that in anyway approximate that life of leisure inscribed into the minds of U.S. readers at that time.”¹⁴⁵

Garza-Falcón speculates that González may have seen these images as a way of separating herself from the people and providing objectivity in her folklore studies or that she may have imagined that this was how such wealthy families actually lived. Garza-Falcón sees González as setting herself apart from the *vaquero* and peon as a way of creating intellectual credibility and of showing herself to be less raw and more cultivated, distancing herself from the subjects of her research and making her Mexican heritage more palatable to an Anglo audience.¹⁴⁶

González’s folklore offers far less resistance and criticism than does her fiction. This can partially be attributed to the influence of Dobie, the ideas about academic objectivity, and the style of ethnography that was popular at the time.

González became acquainted with Dobie at UT in the 1920s. For 20 years, he was her mentor, inviting her to his home for dinners, co-signing bank loans with her, and backing her involvement as an officer in the Texas Folklore Society, a group dominated by Anglo men.¹⁴⁷ Dobie’s parents had settled Texas in the 1830s, and his three uncles were Texas Rangers. He grew up as the frontier closed and was raised with his father’s *vaqueros* and allowed to play with them, though they lived in segregated housing¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁵Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 80.

¹⁴⁶Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 81.

¹⁴⁷Limón, *Dancing with the Devil*, 61.

¹⁴⁸Limón, *Dancing with the Devil*, 61.

Although his fascination and respect for the *vaqueros* shine through his writing, historian James McNutt has described the “Vaquero of the Brush Country,” as an apology for Anglo oppression.¹⁴⁹

Limón argues that González took on Dobie’s style of ethnography and his ideology not so much because they were forced on her by the existing Anglo patriarchy but because “to a considerable degree, they suited her or were not that far from her own race- and class-derived inclinations. Won over to the side of domination, perhaps won over from the very beginning.”¹⁵⁰

For the most part, she distanced herself from the subjects of her folklore, and Dobie used her class position as a way to counteract any prejudice she might encounter as a result of her ethnicity. Dobie wrote in the introduction to her first paper on the Texas Mexican *vaquero*, published by for the Texas Folklore Society in 1927, that “[h]er grandfather was the richest landowner of the Texas border. Thus she has an unusual heritage of intimacy with her subject.”¹⁵¹ He pointed out that she was able to understand “the landed proprietor who in my part of the state forms the better class.”¹⁵² Separating herself from the mass of Mexican Americans worked to her advantage, and a *Dallas Morning News* article on April 25, 1927, covering a folklore society meeting shows how

¹⁴⁹McNutt, “Beyond Regionalism,” 205.

¹⁵⁰Limón, *Dancing with the Devil*, 61.

¹⁵¹González, “Texas Mexican Vaquero,” 21.

¹⁵²González, “Texas Mexican Vaquero,” 21.

she was portrayed as an exotic Mexican woman and how she participated in the romanticizing of Mexican culture.

The stage was delightfully set to represent the great open spaces with cactus, prickly pear bushes and a campfire. About the fire were Mexican rifles, blankets canteens, morals, and cow saddles. Three Mexican vaqueros sang songs of the trail in Spanish. Jose, dressed in his vaquero costume, was the hit of the evening. He was singing a ballad of gregeria certes (cq), and Miss Jovita González then read her paper with a delightful accent.¹⁵³

Though she depicted the resisters to Anglo oppression sympathetically, her folklore puts much less emphasis on the subtle understanding of banditry and resistance found in Paredes' study of Gregorio Cortéz, *With His Pistol in His Hand*.¹⁵⁴ In an introductory footnote to one article, she says she will deal with "the wandering cowboy whose only possessions are his horse, his unlimited store of legends and traditions, and the love for his *chata*."¹⁵⁵ She talks of how he has inherited a love of freedom and a fatalism from his Indian ancestor so that he simply shrugs his shoulders and says, "if it is my fate, what can I do about it?"¹⁵⁶ She perpetuates common stereotypes of ethnic Mexicans even in her scholarship, writing that South Texas between 1848 and 1930 demonstrated "a racial struggle, a fight between an aggressive, conquering and materialistic people on the one hand and a volatile and easily satisfied race."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³"Mexican Style Entertainment at Folklore Society," *Dallas Morning News*, April 25, 1927.

¹⁵⁴Paredes, *Pistol in His Hand*.

¹⁵⁵González, "Texas Mexican Vaquero," 7.

¹⁵⁶González, "Texas Mexican Vaquero," 11.

¹⁵⁷Jovita González, "America Invades the Border Towns," *Southwest Review* 5, no. 15 (1930): 469.

She said she collected her material on vaqueros from vaqueros and peons, whom she described as all ‘half breeds.’¹⁵⁸ However in “Tales and Songs of the Texas Mexican,” she does write of Remigio Trevino, whose boast was that he had killed ten Americans.¹⁵⁹ In the 1935 story “The Bullet Swallower” for Dobie’s collection *Puro Mexicano*, she wrote of Traga Balas: “I have seen the rangers pumping water into the mouth of an innocent man because he would not confess to something he had not done. But that is another story.”¹⁶⁰

The approach to folklore she learned from Dobie was different from contemporary practitioners in that its primary emphasis was literary. Dobie was not focused on the examination of cultural attributes like Franz Boas or with the diffusionist approach of S. H. Thompson of Indiana University, who saw folklore as a literary artifact and was less concerned with cultural meaning than with distribution over time and space, in what was known as the historical-geographic approach. Both stressed the rigorous collections of texts in the field with little alteration even for grammar and syntax. Dobie was more literary and took a looser approach, emphasizing aesthetic appreciation of the stories. He saw the value as being in the tales themselves and his role as turning the tales of Texas folklore into literature. Dobie placed his folklore in the

¹⁵⁸González, “Texas Mexican Vaquero,” 86.

¹⁵⁹Jovita González, “Tales and Songs of the Texas Mexicans” in *Man, Bird, and Beast*, ed. J. Frank Dobie (Austin, TX: Texas Folklore Society, 1930), 110.

¹⁶⁰Jovita González “The Bullet Swallower” in *Puro Mexicano*, ed. J. Frank Dobie (Austin, TX: Texas Folklore Society, 2000), 102–103.

literary tradition of Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving, W.H. Hudson, and W. B. Yeats.¹⁶¹

Jovita González followed this to a large extent always searching out the good story and the picturesque, focusing on the tales and personalities of her childhood:

My sister Tula and I did everything together,” she remembered. ”We went horseback riding with my grandfather to the pastures and visited the homes of the cowboys and ranch hands. We enjoyed the last the most. There was Tio Patricio, the mystic. Chon, who was so ugly, poor fellow, he reminded us of a toad; old Remigio who wielded the *metate* with the dexterity of a peasant woman and made wonderful tortillas. Tia Chita, whose stories about ghosts and witches made our hair stand on end. Pedro, the hunter and traveler, who had been as far as Sugar Land and who had seen black people with black wool for hair; one-eyed Manuelito, the ballad singer, .Tio Camillio, all furnished ranch lore in our young lives.¹⁶²

Transgressing Boundaries, Creating a Hybrid Identity

Despite her embracing of whiteness and an upper class identity, Jovita González transgressed the bounds of conventional academia by the very act of telling the folktales of her own people and putting them into the leading role in fiction, which was, in itself, a form of defiance. Even in areas where her neutrality and refusal to offer critiques of a racialized patriarchal class system may make her seem complicit with the upper class, both Mexican American and Anglo, she actually transgressed the boundaries of conventional behavior for a woman, not only in her writing but in her life.

Her husband claimed in an interview with Cotera that he and his wife had burned the manuscript of *Caballero* because they felt the depiction of the Anglo-Mexican

¹⁶¹Limón, *Dancing with the Devil*, 51.

¹⁶²González, Handwritten autobiography in Box 1, Folder 21.

conflict would not be accepted by the Anglos who controlled their teaching careers. This shows that she saw her work as threatening to the status quo. Simply by becoming a folklorist and obtaining her master's degree from UT at a time when few Mexican American women even attended college, she broke the bounds of convention.

Her hair in a bun, her knitting in hand, and a letter of recommendation from the local priest in hand, she traveled the borderlands collecting stories at a time when few women of any ethnicity would have taken on such a task. Her aura of respectability made her work as an ethnographer, a scholar and a teacher possible. For her, embracing whiteness and a middle-class status were a part of respectability for a Mexican American woman.

It was in part her propriety and conformity that allowed her to create the hybrid role she did. She also played conventional roles, as wife to her husband, as teacher, and as upholder of the mores and self-perceptions of the middle class Mexican American community. Although she was married, she did not have children, so she escaped the round of domesticity and childrearing. She portrayed herself as a proper wife and schoolteacher and as being from the upper class.¹⁶³

But she broke the mold by telling the stories of resistance to Anglo domination and by creating Mexican American heroines who rebelled against Anglo domination. Her intellectual influences included strong, unconventional women. She remembered how in childhood she learned about powerful women: "We rattled off in Spanish *La*

¹⁶³Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 96.

influencia de la mujer, a poem which began with Judith, the Old Testament heroine and ended with Doña Josefa Ortíz de Domínguez, the mother of Mexico's independence. We knew about Sor Juana, the Mexican nun who in the seventeenth century addressed men as 'foolish men who accuse women without a motive.'"¹⁶⁴

Gerda Lerna makes the point that class is always "generic." It is expressed and institutionalized in terms that are always different for men and women.¹⁶⁵ For women of minority groups, the generic component of class is even stronger, Foley points out.¹⁶⁶ For González to survive as a female scholar, appropriating a higher class and aspiring to whiteness were necessary to survival. Although she was not perceived as a radical and does not seem to have seen herself as one, she was most definitely a trailblazer, laying the groundwork for Mexican American scholars and authors. The fact that her work did not find a publisher may in fact indicate how far ahead of her time she was as she worked to create the foundational literature of Mexican Americans in Texas.

By transgressing the boundaries not only of Anglo culture but of her own, Jovita González was able to create an identity apart for herself as a Mexican American woman, a hybrid identity that was not entirely Mexican, but that was white enough to be accepted in Anglo social circles. She acted as a crossroads between Anglo and Mexican American culture. Able to morph from token glamorous Mexican woman presenting songs of her background before an almost entirely Anglo, male folklore society to

¹⁶⁴González, Handwritten ancestral and autobiographical information in Box 22, Folder 2.

¹⁶⁵Gerda Lerna, "Reconceptualizing Differences among Women" *Journal of Women's History* vol. 1, no. 3 (Winter 1990): 107–110.

¹⁶⁶Foley, *White Scourge*, 12.

ethnographer listening to folk tales in Spanish around a kitchen table in Rio Grande City while she knitted, she was able to flourish and be accepted in a variety of *milieus*. As a Spanish teacher, she encouraged her students, both Anglo and Hispanic, to respect and admire Spanish culture and history.¹⁶⁷ And in co-authoring Spanish language textbooks with her husband, she presented Spanish culture to non-Spanish speakers. Her fiction, though published posthumously, also created a bridge, showing a Mexican American perspective on key events in Texas history, instilling pride in Mexican Americans while showing Anglo readers an alternative perspective.

González used the folk stories and culture and customs of Mexico, and of the borderlands, to create a new identity for Mexican Americans, an identity in of pride in culture and ancestry, just like the pride she tried to instill in her students at Ray High School. She created a distinctive telling of borderland folk culture as a scholar, and she was one of the first authors to create fiction of the borderlands from a Mexican American perspective, a highly contentious proposition at the time of her writing. Despite her proper ways, she portrayed rebels, and those who resisted Anglo domination, in the most flattering of lights.

By presenting Mexican American folklore to a largely Anglo audience and allowing men like Dobie to see Mexican culture from a different perspective, through the eyes of a Mexican woman, she acted as a crossroads. By working with an Anglo co-author on her fiction, she tried to bring the world of Mexican American history into the Anglo mainstream. And in *Caballero* and *Dew on the Thorn*, she was creating

¹⁶⁷Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 96.

foundational works of Mexican American literature, a legacy that was not realized in her own lifetime but was nonetheless of great significance. She also became a crossroads between cultures by helping her husband with the creation of bilingual education program in the schools in Corpus Christi.

She was constrained by her ideas of how a Mexican American woman of a certain class should behave and this was reinforced not only by Anglo society but by the values of her own. Yet, by embracing the hybrid identity of the Mexican American, she gained a certain freedom: She was able to move in both worlds. And by presenting her Mexican world to the Anglo mainstream, she gained acceptance in the scholarly world of Anglos and respect in her own right. But her search for respectability in the Anglo world also made her separate herself from her own people. Garza-Falcón points out that in Corpus Christi, most of González's friends were Anglo.¹⁶⁸ The Mexican American generation of which she was a part valued assimilation, citizenship and conformity to Anglo ideas of respectability. This class orientation can be seen in the contempt she felt for singer Lydia Mendoza. Garza-Falcón relates how when asked if she knew Lydia Mendoza she replied: “‘¿Esa que grita en la plaza de zacate, que la voy a conocer?’ (That woman who yells at the grass plaza (the Haymarket Plaza in San Antonio); how can you expect that I would know such a person?)”¹⁶⁹

One of the questions I ask in this dissertation is to what extent women's transgressions played a role in ethnic identity formation, as Mexican women became

¹⁶⁸Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 97.

¹⁶⁹Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 90.

Mexican American. I have examined whether transgressing these societal boundaries served to create an identity apart for Mexican women, one in which certain kinds of boundaries ceased to serve as transgressions, becoming instead the foundation of a new hybrid identity. In González's case, this was certainly true.

By crossing boundaries of conventional gendered behavior, ethnicity, and class, she created folklore and literature that expressed a new Mexican-American identity. By showing the viewpoint of Mexican ranchers and landowners in *Caballero*, she was able to depict a world in which Mexicans became Americans, both resisting and conforming to the new culture. She created a literature that was unquestionably one of the borderlands. In *Caballero*, the reader learns that her characters have come to the northern Mexican town of Mier to escape the corruption of Mexico City. She describes a culture that persisted, resisting Anglo domination and keeping its own integrity and customs. And though some of her folk stories hark back to the customs of Central Mexico and Spain, many deal with the specifics of the border world, the cattle, the cactus and agave, and with the customs and unique culture that develops between Mier and Matamoros, Roma and Brownsville.

The physical and cultural space of the borderlands helped González to use her transnational identity to create new forms of folklore and literature that brought together the worlds of Mexico and the United States. She comes from a world—and writes of a world—in which the physical boundaries of nation states are not definitive. A person born in the northern Mexican town of Mier, or Cerralvo, might live in Roma or Rio Grande City, on the Texas side and cross back to Mier to visit family and friends, to visit

and do business. The border did not constrain the movement of cattle, horses, or trade, and in fact encouraged them. A border resident might shop in New Orleans, take care of official business in Mexico City, and socialize in Matamoros. Mexico also served as an escape, or a safety valve, as when the disappointed lover and cattle thief flees Texas to Mexico City in *Caballero*.

National borders also do not divide in terms of the customs and folk tales she describes. The customs of celebrating St. John's Day, the *nacimientos* or nativity scenes, and the *posadas* are the same in Mier, Mexico, as in Roma, Texas. Of course, the language also is the same, and the culture of the people is similar on both sides of the border. Nature also sees no dividing line by national border. The prairies, the brush country, the wildlife she writes so eloquently about are the same on the Mexican and the U.S. sides, as is the agricultural world of cattle and goat raiser, and the customs and practices of the *vaqueros* and peons.

But as the national border of Mexico changes and it becomes part of the U.S., she addresses the cultural conflicts as the Mexican ranchers of South Texas meet the northern invaders. Here the cultural conflict occurs not only as national boundaries shift but as two societies meet. In *Dew on the Thorn*, set in the 20th century, even though the national borders have long been set, there still is a cultural conflict between the Anglo settler and the more established Mexicans, although her characters are so embedded in the Mexican culture of deep South Texas that their actual encounters with the world of Anglos are rare.

Ultimately, the border people of González's folklore and fiction are a reflection of her own aspirations and worldview. Paredes wrote of Gregorio Cortez,

He was a man, a Border man. What did he look like? Well that is hard to tell. Some say he was short and some say he was tall; some say he was Indian brown and some say he was blonde like a newborn cockroach. But I'd say he was not too dark and not too fair, not too thin and not too fat, not too short and not too tall; and he looked just a little bit like me.¹⁷⁰

In the same way that Paredes described Gregorio Cortez as taking on the appearance and characteristics of the tellers of his stories, so did González imbue her fictional characters and folklore subjects with her own world view and that of the Mexican American generation of which she was a part.

In many ways, her work was a valuation and affirmation of *Mexicanidad* and a valorization of Mexican culture, especially in the face of the onslaught of the Anglo world. And although her focus is on upper class Spanish customs, she does give value to the tales and stories of the peon. If González had been more successful during her lifetime, her breaking of these cultural boundaries and a transformation of self might have been more apparent, and her life might have been freer. But as it was, she compromised, deciding to follow her husband to a school-teaching job in Corpus Christi instead of pursuing her doctorate at Stanford as she had dreamed. The fact that she never gained fame as an author because her literary works were not published while she was living also meant her life largely was one of housewife and teacher. If she had become a

¹⁷⁰Paredes, *Pistol in His Hand*, 34.

famous author or a well-known scholar teaching at UT alongside Dobie, she might have shown more radical colors.¹⁷¹ We will never know.

As it was, she remained very much a proper lady, fitting into culture the small city of Corpus Christi as a high school teacher and wife, a member of the *gente decente*, certainly, but also a rebel and boundary breaker, and ultimately a bridge builder and a crossroads between Anglo and Hispanic views of history and between Mexican American and Chicano generation views of their own past.

¹⁷¹Garza-Falcón, *Gente Decente*, 97.

CHAPTER III

ROSITA FERNÁNDEZ: LA ROSA DE SAN ANTONIO

Rosita Fernández performed for large crowds in San Antonio for more than 60 years, her long black hair in an elaborate chignon, wearing richly-embroidered sequined dresses in the style of the China Poblana. Her name became synonymous with San Antonio, as she played for dignitaries and convention-goers and took on a central role in San Antonio's tourism industry. Although she had the opportunity to go to Hollywood to act in movies and to tour nationally as a singer, she generally confined her performances to San Antonio, at her husband's insistence.

Although Fernández subscribed to most gender norms, she broke with convention by pursuing a performing career and by capitalizing on her Mexican heritage as a way to attain career success. Her performances solidified a new Mexican American identity, as she brought the folk music and costume of Mexico to the radio waves and performance venues of San Antonio. A Mexican immigrant, she popularized the traditional costume and songs of Mexico for both a Mexican-American and Anglo audience, and her face became known throughout San Antonio in advertisements. She became the prototype of a glamorous Mexican woman, the same and yet different from the women who lived in the city's Mexican Westside. Beautiful and playing on her exoticism, she was able to show the richness of Mexican American culture to a diverse group of admirers.

Her performances helped brand San Antonio as a Mexican American cultural center. Her elegant and exotic persona, with her costumes, ethnic jewelry, dark flowing hair, dimples and Spanish accent made her beloved by presidents and dignitaries. Her acceptance into Anglo society in San Antonio paved the way for a greater acceptance of Mexican American culture the city. It was said of her that she “melted the border” between the United States and Mexico, and she said that she hoped she was able to bring a new understanding of Mexican American culture and a new respect for Mexican Americans to Anglos.¹⁷² She was able to create a dual identity of being both Mexican to the core and yet also an American success story, even being invited to the Johnson Ranch five times by President Lyndon B. Johnson and Ladybird Johnson.¹⁷³

She had to break the boundaries of traditional Mexican womanhood to even perform. When Fernández married in 1938, her husband Raúl Almaguer forced her to quit her performing career, believing that a woman should be home taking care of her family rather than on stage or screen. “She became ill, actually ill, and I swallowed my ego and realized I was hurting my marriage and hurting her,” Almaguer remembered. She agreed to a compromise: She would continue to perform but would confine herself primarily to San Antonio.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷²Anthony Medrano, “Rosita Fernández and Compañías de América: Somos Novios,” (1983), accessed August 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9AE9-q85f0>.

¹⁷³Medrano, “Somos Novios.”

¹⁷⁴Elizabeth McIlhaney, “Rosita Celebrates 50th Anniversary as a Performer,” *San Antonio Light*, May 30, 1980.

Thus Fernández's career became intertwined with that of her adopted city. She sang jingles for local companies such as Gebhardt Mexican Foods Company and Frito-Lay. She appeared on a calendar for White Wing tortillas and in ads for a local insurance company. Fernández became the Anglo's glamorized version of a Mexican American woman. She presented a Mexican American hybrid identity to the Anglo world, as well as serving as an ambassador from the Mexican American community of San Antonio, creating a public image of the Mexican American woman that was embraced by both cultures.

In a 1995 article published in the *Houston Chronicle*, Associated Press reporter Kelley Shannon noted Fernández's celebrity in San Antonio. "Restaurant workers greet her. Tour guides point her out."¹⁷⁵ "I would never leave San Antonio," Fernández said in the article. "I am San Antonio."¹⁷⁶

More than any other Mexican American performer of the period, Rosita Fernández crossed class and ethnic boundaries, navigating the difficulties of performing for a bicultural audience throughout her career. She usually appeared in the traditional Mexican costume of the *China Poblana*, hair in an elaborate chignon. Unlike contemporary singer Lydia Mendoza, who dressed in a similar style, Fernández was as popular with Anglos as with Mexican Americans. While singers like Mendoza, *bolero* Chelo Silva, and *dueto* Carmen y Laura sang to almost entirely Mexican and Mexican American audiences, Fernández constantly crossed the boundaries of language, culture

¹⁷⁵Kelly Shannon, "San Antonio Tourism," *Houston Chronicle*, December 31, 1995.

¹⁷⁶Shannon, "San Antonio Tourism."

and class and maintained popularity among both working class Mexicans and upper class Anglos.¹⁷⁷

Some Mexican Americans saw her as a cultural ambassador. State Legislator Charlie González said after her death in 2006 that she had brought Mexican culture to a wider audience and acted as an ambassador for the Latino community. “First Lady ‘Lady Bird’ Johnson named her ‘San Antonio's First Lady of Song,’ yet in San Antonio, we knew her as ‘Rosita’ and were very proud that she represented our community,” González said. “But, at a time when most Americans did not have first-hand experience with Latinos, figures like Rosita or Desi Arnaz began to change perceptions and biases against our community. Rosita was the consummate cultural ambassador for San Antonio and Latinos throughout America.”¹⁷⁸

There were several factors that contributed to Fernández’s successful navigation of multicultural San Antonio. One was that she sang and spoke in both Spanish and English and sang popular songs from the U.S. and Mexico. She favored *canciones románticas* and *boleros* backed by *orquestas*.¹⁷⁹ These were more like American popular music than the accordion-laced *rancheras* that more traditional singers like Lydia Mendoza preferred, and were more successful as crossover music. Though

¹⁷⁷Shannon, “San Antonio Tourism.”

¹⁷⁸Charlie González, “Tribute to Rosita Fernández, San Antonio’s First Lady of Song,” *Capitol Words*, accessed June 23, 2012, http://capitolwords.org/date/2006/06/20/E1214-4_tribute-to-rosita-fernandez-san-antonios-first-lad/.

¹⁷⁹Ruthie Winegarten, Interview with Rosita Fernández (San Antonio, Texas, on April 29, 1997), in the Rosita Fernández Papers, MS18 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas Archives, University of Texas at San Antonio, 1997).

Fernández sang *boleros*, just as Chelo Silva did, she brought none of Silva's overt sexuality to her performances, instead creating an image of wholesome and modest (though exotic) femininity. Just as important was her use of multiple media to reach her audience, from radio to movies to live performance. Perhaps most significantly, she was able to navigate within San Antonio's burgeoning tourism industry, conveying an image of romantic Old Mexico that elite local boosters were trying to perpetuate, even while they largely ignored the blatant class and ethnic divisions the city harbored. San Antonio was a city that idealized its Mexican past while often either discriminating or ignoring the actual Mexicans who lived there. City leaders created a commodified version of San Antonio, in which its Mexicanness was formulated to appeal to Anglo tourists.

Even in the 19th century, travelers toured San Antonio's crumbling missions and were drawn by its women, whom they saw as exotic, beautiful señoritas. When Stephen Crane visited the Alamo in 1889, he found San Antonio was home to "modernizing Protestants paying homage to the 'almighty trolley and paying little regard to the city's sacred history and legends.'"¹⁸⁰ By the 1890s, more than 100,000 tourists had visited the romantic, decaying missions.¹⁸¹ O. Henry, who visited San Antonio in the 1880s and 1890s, wrote in his short story, "The Enchanted Kiss," that the nightly encampments upon the historic Alamo Plaza, in the heart of the city, had been "a carnival, a saturnalia that was renowned throughout the land. Then the caterers numbered hundreds, the

¹⁸⁰Stephen Crane, *Tales, Sketches, and Reports* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1973), 468.

¹⁸¹Daniel Arreola, "Urban Ethnic Landscape Identity," *Geographical Review* 85, no. 4 (October 1995): 518.

patrons thousands. Drawn by the coquettish señoritas, the music of the weird Spanish minstrels, and the strange piquant Mexican dishes served at a hundred competing tables, crowds thronged the Alamo Plaza all night."¹⁸²

The Chile Queens, women who served up chili at outdoor stands, often wearing traditional Mexican outfits, were considered a San Antonio tourist attraction from the late 1880s until they were shut down in the late 1930s, for health reasons.¹⁸³ One writer in 1894 described them this way:

Now, sir, you've seen the historic Alamo, the old cathedral and the missions and got a whiff of our ozone, the citizen would remark with righteous pride, and tonight you must come and eat a Mexican supper and see the chili queens. The chili queens are one of our most noted attractions—the beautiful, dark-eyed señoritas, you know.'¹⁸⁴

The tourist generally knew. This was in the late eighties, the palmy days of the chili queens, when their fame had spread to the larger northern cities. Some very musical verse about them had appeared in the magazines, and in the newspaper sketches they were idealized as stunning creatures, with the rich, brown skins of the tropics and the languorous grace and bewitching black eyes of Spanish doña.¹⁸⁵

Rosita Fernández carried on the tradition of bringing the idealized Mexican woman into the view of the tourist—the beautiful Mexican woman as tourist attraction. She fit in with a deliberate decision made in the early 20th century by San Antonio elites to market the city's character and heritage." She was depicted, not as a woman coming

¹⁸²O. Henry, *The Enchanted Kiss. Collected Stories of O. Henry* (New York, NY: Avenel Books, 1979), 48.

¹⁸³Gary Popik, History of Chile, accessed July 5, 2012, http://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/texas/entry/chili_queen_or_chile_queen/.

¹⁸⁴"Sadie the Chile Queen," *Forest and Stream*, April 28, 1894.

¹⁸⁵"Sadie the Chile Queen," 358.

from a poor Mexican immigrant family of 16, but as exemplifying all that Anglos found appealing about the world of Mexico. In an article in *Rural Radio* magazine in February 1939, she was described as a “petite and charming Mexican woman who loves to ride horses and joyfully dance the Argentine tango in the evening.”¹⁸⁶ Fernández was well aware of the importance of projecting this image, and she always saw clothes and personal presentation as an extremely important part of her performance and public image. She was very particular about her costumes, which she and her mother and sisters sewed.¹⁸⁷ Many ads show her in the traditional Mexican national dress of the *China Poblana*. She did ads for the upscale department store Joske’s, the first air-conditioned department store in Texas, a store where a customer could buy a custom-made saddle and spurs, appliances, an airline ticket, an oriental rug, or gourmet food, and which had some of the most elaborate Christmas window displays in the state. In the front page Joske’s ad in *La Cana News*, she is shown with her hair in an elaborate updo, an embroidered shawl, and a white, lacy Mexican dress.¹⁸⁸

Clothes acted as an important way of bridging cultures for Fernández, and she helped make the Mexican traditional dress of the *China Poblana* familiar to her many Anglo fans. But it was an exaggeration of the traditional folkloric costume. She wore enormous hooped skirts covered in sequins, far more showy than the already elaborate

¹⁸⁶“Rosita Fernandez, Queen of Mexican Music.” *Rural Radio Magazine* 2, no. 4 (February 1939).

¹⁸⁷Deborah Vargas, “La Rosa de San Antonio,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 24, no. 23 (2003): 180.

¹⁸⁸Joske’s advertisement, *La Cana News*, April 1976.

China Poblana costumes popular in Mexican *folklorico* dancing. Her *China Poblana* dress grew so famous it was inaugurated into the Smithsonian Hall of Fame—the national costume of Mexico honored in the national museum of the United States. Her clothes played a large role in the creation of her Mexican American image, an identity that was projected into the Anglo world at the same time that it was embraced by her Mexican American fans. She used the folk dress, folk music and popular culture of Mexico as a way to create an image of the Mexican American woman, an image that catered to Anglo tastes by glamorizing the exotic aspect of Mexican femininity, but also remained true to many central aspects of Mexican American culture and life, such as the importance of modesty and motherhood.¹⁸⁹

San Antonio was, and remains, the U.S. city with the densest Mexican American population. According to geographer Daniel Arreola, it also has long been the primary center of Mexican culture in the United States. He points out that there are only few cities in the country that have an association with one ethnic group like San Antonio does. San Francisco is associated with the Chinese, New Orleans with French Creoles, Germans with Milwaukee, and the Irish with Boston.¹⁹⁰ Fernández described San Antonio as “un Mexico chiquito,”¹⁹¹ a small Mexico.

During the first twenty years of the 20th century, railroad routes made San Antonio a jumping off point for immigrants, ideas, and culture from northern Mexico.

¹⁸⁹Vargas, “La Rosa,” 180.

¹⁹⁰Daniel D. Arreola, “The Mexican American Cultural Capital,” *Geographical Review* 77, no. 1 (January 1987): 21.

¹⁹¹Vargas, “La Rosa,” 169.

The International and Great Northern railroad in 1881 connected San Antonio to Chicago and then to Laredo, with Mexican railway lines carrying on to Monterrey. San Antonio also became a corridor to the American Southwest with the Southern Pacific railroad being built in 1887 to Los Angeles by way of San Antonio. Prosperous Mexicans often traveled to San Antonio to shop, Stores directed advertising at wealthy Mexican shoppers in the newspapers, offering free rail tickets to Monterrey for anyone spending more than \$1500. By the 1890s, wealthy Mexicans from as far south as San Luis Potosí were frequenting San Antonio on buying excursions.¹⁹²

In the Southwest, Texas attracted the most Mexican immigrants between 1910 and 1930. Texas contained more than half of all foreign-born Mexicans in the first two decades of 20th century. It was not until 1930 that Los Angeles surpassed San Antonio as the city with the largest Mexican population, but even then, San Antonio had the largest percentage of Mexicans of any city—36 percent in San Antonio but only 8 percent in Los Angeles. San Antonio also had the highest Mexican-born population—68 percent versus 54 percent in Los Angeles in 1920. In 1980, slightly more than half of San Antonio's population was of Mexican origin, while in Los Angeles, only one-fifth were. Between 1910 and 1920, it is estimated that 25,000 immigrants were political refugees. These refugees formed a center of Mexican culture in San Antonio. Ignacio Lozano founded the newspaper *La Prensa*, originally intended to serve these refugees and

¹⁹²Arreola, "Cultural Capital," 21.

initially written from the viewpoint of the elite, but later expanding to serve the needs of a broader Mexican immigrant community.¹⁹³

San Antonio also became a center for the mass marketing of Mexican food and products. The first *tortillería* was started in San Antonio in 1924, with a maximum capacity of 50,000 tortillas day. William Gebhardt, a German immigrant from New Braunfels, began to manufacture and sell chili powder in San Antonio in 1896.¹⁹⁴ By the early 20th century, Mexican restaurants were featured in the city's promotional literature. A 1924 directory listed 24 Mexican eateries in the city.¹⁹⁵

While Rosita Fernández exemplified the aspects of the city that San Antonio elites wanted to present about themselves and their city, the vast majority of Mexican and Mexican American women in San Antonio suffered from dire poverty. As Julia Kirk Blackwelder pointed out in her study of women in Depression-era San Antonio, Mexican Americans faced inadequate housing, much higher rates of disease than the Anglo population, and many cases of malnutrition.¹⁹⁶

Blackwelder described the ethnically-based system as being more like a hierarchical caste system than a true class system, as there was little possibility for a Mexican American woman to move up. Mexican American women, if they worked for

¹⁹³Arreola, "Cultural Capital," 25.

¹⁹⁴Arreola, "Cultural Capital," 31.

¹⁹⁵J.C. Sologiasoa, *Guía General: Diretoria Mexicano de San Antonio Texas* (San Antonio, TX: San Antonio Paper Company, 1924), 17–34.

¹⁹⁶Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression*, 63

pay at all, often worked in exploitative, dangerous, poorly paid industries, like pecan shelling or sewing piece work at home.¹⁹⁷

Author Larry McMurtry wrote in his collection of essays about Texas *In a Narrow Grave*, published in 1969, that “We have never really captured San Antonio, we Texans—somehow the Spaniards have managed to hold it. We have attacked with freeways and motels, shopping centers, and now that H-Bomb of boosterism, Hemisphere, but happily, the victory eludes us. San Antonio has kept an ambience that all the rest of our cities lack.”¹⁹⁸

But much of the Mexican flavor marketed for tourists in San Antonio has been an invented Mexicanness, a façade which shielded the dire poverty, segregation, and exploitation of the mass of Mexican Americans living there. When the city of San Antonio began to preserve and market Mexican culture, it did not promote the actual landscapes that Mexicans built and lived in, such as the vibrant downtown with its Mexican-owned shops and restaurants. When city fathers marketed San Antonio, they ignored the vital Mexican quarter, the real Hispanic commercial landscape of the city. Arreola wrote. “Instead, they substituted an ideal landscape that was contrived, exotic, romantic and in many ways the antithesis of the city’s true Mexican downtown.”¹⁹⁹

Blackwelder pointed out that a small group of Anglos appropriated the Spanish colonial style, and that the Anglo elite developed a taste for certain selected aspects of

¹⁹⁷Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression*, 72

¹⁹⁸Larry McMurtry, *In a Narrow Grave. Essays on Texas* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1969), 48.

¹⁹⁹Arreola, “Landscape Identity,” 524.

Mexican culture. On San Antonio's north side, she said, grand houses, luxurious courtyards and tropical gardens displayed the admiration elite Anglos had for Spanish colonial architecture. The Battle of the Flowers celebration, which began in 1890 in honor of the Battle of San Jacinto, included many elements of Mexican style, and yet was controlled by rich Anglos.²⁰⁰ Anglo wives planned teas and parties attended by other Anglo wives, while their daughters acted as queens and princesses of the court, wearing colorful dresses encrusted with jewels and riding in flower bedecked floats in parades. Mexican American women could not participate in these aspects of the festivities, but cooked, cleaned and served behind the scenes, while West Side seamstresses fashioned the elaborate dresses of the Anglo debutantes.²⁰¹ The annual April Fiesta now covers a 10-day period with more than 200 civic and community celebrations.²⁰²

Secular tourist boosters also romanticized the historic missions, including the Alamo, as part of Mexico's romantic past, while obscuring the Alamo's Catholic history as they made it a symbol of U.S. and Texas patriotism. Preservationists like Ethel Wilson Harris and others saw the Alamo as part of a bygone era whose romantic image contrasted with industrial society. The parishioners themselves began to be seen as living artifacts.²⁰³ Fernández saw herself as one of the preservers of this heritage. She said in one newspaper interview that she wanted to "keep Mexican-style performance alive in

²⁰⁰Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression*, 104

²⁰¹Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression*, 107

²⁰²"Fiesta San Antonio" website, accessed August 1, 2012, <http://www.fiesta-sa.org/>.

²⁰³Thomas S. Brenner, *Blessed with Tourists: The Borderlands of Religion and Tourism in San Antonio* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 17.

San Antonio so that our heritage our ideas and music and culture don't die in San Antonio, so that it is not modernized so much so that it is not a heritage city anymore.”²⁰⁴

Even in the 19th century, it was more the idea of Mexican heritage than actual Mexican culture that was put forth as a tourist attraction. In an 1890 guidebook, William Corner made a dozen recommendations for sites tourists should see, but only two of these were part of the local Mexican scene.²⁰⁵ It was not until the flood of 1921 that a faux-Mexican downtown landscape began to be created, as city officials became interested in controlling the San Antonio River. The *Paseo del Rio*, or River Walk, aimed at controlling and beautifying the river, created a winding waterway spanned by graceful bridges and flanked by hotels, restaurants and entertainment venues. Plans for the River Walk were first proposed in 1929 but were put on hold because of the Depression, and the project was not completed until 1948. The *Fiesta Noche del Rio*, in which Fernández played such a key role, began to be organized along the River Walk after 1965.²⁰⁶

The Arneson River Theater, Fernández's regular performance venue, also displays the invented Mexican style of the River Walk. It is an amphitheater with a Spanish colonial revival backdrop, with a bell tower and a stage on the north bank and a seating area on the south bank. Arreola said that the theater, which became so closely

²⁰⁴“Fernández Choses Family over Fame, Fortune,” *San Antonio Express-News*, May 31, 1990.

²⁰⁵Arreola, “Landscape Identity,” 520.

²⁰⁶Arreola, “Landscape Identity,” 520.

associated with Fernández that its adjoining bridge was named for her in 1982, embodies the created Hispanic flavor of San Antonio more than any other structure.²⁰⁷

Another project designed to capitalize on the ethnic flavor in San Antonio was the construction of La Villita by Mayor Maury Maverick in 1939 as a revitalization project and tourist attraction. The project included \$75,000 for property restoration of the historic multi-ethnic settlement and a museum that focused on living crafts, particularly Hispanic crafts. La Villita was designed to highlight the city's Mexican, German, French, and English influences. El Mercado, a large Mexican crafts market attracting tourists, also has been controlled and promoted by the municipal government. The area served as the market for San Antonio for hundreds of years, and in 1938 the existing building was constructed with federal funds and then remodeled as an urban renewal project in 1976.²⁰⁸

These structures represent a romanticized past untainted by the complications of a city in which real-life Mexicans generally were poor and oppressed. As Arreola put it, "Market Square, the River Walk and La Villita represent that unspecific romantic past, places where one can fleetingly relive a golden age and be purged of historic guilt."²⁰⁹

These developments in San Antonio were part of a general trend of heritage tourism that emerged in the Southwest to promote city building and local investment as well as to attract visitors. This type of tourism had its origins in the West and did not

²⁰⁷Arreola, "Landscape Identity," 528.

²⁰⁸Arreola, "Landscape Identity," 520.

²⁰⁹Arreola, "Landscape Identity," 520.

emerge in other parts of the country until after World War II. Los Angeles, like San Antonio, marketed its western heritage as it was transformed from a small adobe village to a commercial city between 1849 and 1930. City fathers promoted a romantic Spanish and Mexican heritage while whitewashing both the present and the past realities of local Mexicans. Los Angeles' celebration, La Fiesta, gave prominence to white history while putting people of color in bit parts, thus endorsing the "Fantasy Heritage" of a romantic Spanish past.²¹⁰ In a similar way, the touristic myth of Santa Fe was built up in the late 19th century through art and architecture revivals and preservation efforts, while disguising "profound cultural divides and often brutal class divisions."²¹¹

Fernández did not initially fit into this romanticized version of the city's history but in her early years she was fairly typical of successful Mexican American singers. Before the 1930s, women performers primarily were confined to *zarzuela* performances in vaudeville theater, where they worked as singers, dancers, chorus girls and comedians.²¹² It was in the late 1920s that the first female vocal duets and trios became popular, moving away from the *zarzuela*-type solos and choral groups that were central to Mexican theater around 1900.²¹³ Scholars aren't certain when women's duets became popular on the U.S. side of the border, but Charles Loomis of the Southwest Museum

²¹⁰William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe, the Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 42.

²¹¹Chris Wilson, *Creating the Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 73

²¹²*Tejano Roots: The Women* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Library) accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/border/arhoolie2/women.html>.

²¹³*Tejano Roots*.

made more than 40 noncommercial cylinder recordings of the Villa sisters, Rosa and Luisa, singing and playing guitar and mandolin in Los Angeles, beginning in 1904.²¹⁴ By the mid-1920s, the Herrera sisters were cutting records for Sunset in Los Angeles; the Posada sisters, Lupe and Virginia, had become local Los Angeles stars by the 1930s, at the same time that Lydia Mendoza and her mother Leonora were recording *duetos* for Blue Bird.²¹⁵ The first *dueto* to receive success on both sides of the border was the Hermanas Padilla from Los Angeles. Margarita and María Padilla sang in a new style that became influential in *ranchera* music and led to a demand for other female duets.²¹⁶

Although many of the earliest examples of female duets came from Los Angeles, by the 1940s, Mexican music in Texas had begun to develop a distinctive character of its own.²¹⁷ In Los Angeles, most immigrants came from the central western states of Jalisco and Michoacán, the birthplace of mariachi music.²¹⁸ Close commercial connections also were forged between Hollywood and Mexico City, an entertainment world in which a Tin Pan Alley style grew up among the casinos and nightclubs of Tijuana during Prohibition.²¹⁹ In Texas, another musical style was developing in the borderlands, based

²¹⁴*Tejano Roots*.

²¹⁵*Tejano Roots*.

²¹⁶*Tejano Roots*.

²¹⁷*Tejano Roots*.

²¹⁸*The Roots of Tejano and Conjunto Music* (Austin, TX: University of Texas at Austin, n.d.), accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/border/arhoolie2/raices.html>.

²¹⁹*Tejano and Conjunto Music*.

on the connection between San Antonio and Monterrey, Mexico.²²⁰ By the late 1940s, *duetos* accompanied by the accordion and *bajo sexto* were popular. This *conjunto* music, also known as *norteña* or *Tejano*, did not exist in California or Central Mexico.²²¹

The music of Texan Mexicans drew on the rich range of styles heard throughout Mexico, from that of the *bandas* of Sinaloa, the *Jarocho* harp music of Veracruz, the *Huastecan* fiddlers accompanied by falsetto singers, the *danzón* and mambo orchestras, and romantic *ranchera* music.²²²

Music in the United States also influenced *Tejano* music, including that of Anglos, African Americans, and immigrant Texan groups—Czechs, Bohemians, Moravians, Germans, and Italians. Much of what is associated with *Tejano* music came out of the mixed cultures of Monterrey, Mexico, in which much industry, including the prosperous brewing industry, was developed by German immigrants. German-made accordions began to gain popularity in Monterrey by the late 19th century.²²³ In Texas, *conjunto* accordion artists like Narcisso Martínez learned many of their songs from German and Czech brass bands. Martínez would listen to the music with a friend who had a good ear, and the friend would whistle the tune back to him as Martínez transposed it for the accordion.²²⁴ *Tejano* music also was influenced by Anglo fiddle, swing, rhythm

²²⁰*Tejano and Conjunto Music.*

²²¹*Tejano and Conjunto Music.*

²²²*Tejano and Conjunto Music.*

²²³*Tejano and Conjunto Music.*

²²⁴*Tejano and Conjunto Music.*

and blues, rock, and soul, along with Western Swing. Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys were advertised in the San Antonio Spanish-language paper *La Prensa* and were popular with Mexican-Americans. Many song styles became well-known through Mexican movies and through Latin American musical trends, like Argentina's tango, which was all the rage in the 1920s, as well as through Spanish-language radio programs.²²⁵ Most *rancheras* and *corridos* were sung to polka or waltz rhythms that had been popular for more than a hundred years in rural South Texas and northern Mexico.²²⁶

In the mid-1920s, *Tejano* music began to be produced on commercial records by major labels such as Victor, Brunswick/Vocalion, Columbia, and Okeh, which used regional talent scouts to find recording artists. The Great Depression resulted in recording labels that survived by producing less expensive records (35¢ each as opposed to 75¢ in the late 1920s). The popularity of the jukebox by the mid-1930s made it an important factor in the spread of recorded music, giving record companies incentive to release more ethnic and regional music.²²⁷

By World War II, shortages of material—such as the shellac from which records were pressed—meant that large recording companies could not produce enough popular music, so they made few regional and ethnic recordings.²²⁸ This created a large demand, particularly from jukebox operators, for ethnic and regionally popular artists. This made

²²⁵*Tejano and Conjunto Music.*

²²⁶*Tejano and Conjunto Music.*

²²⁷*Tejano and Conjunto Music.*

²²⁸*Tejano and Conjunto Music.*

possible the success of labels such as IDEAL, which recorded Fernández, Lydia Mendoza, Carmen y Laura, and many others.²²⁹ With the end of World War II in 1945, millions of workers all over the country, especially those from rural backgrounds who had found work in the well-paying war industries, were making good wages and were buying ethnic and regional music.

The few women who became successful in the male-dominated field of *Tejano* music had to fight public perceptions of immorality as well as censure from their own husbands and families. Most women with musical talent and training sang in their homes or churches or were music teachers.

Fernández did not initially fit into this romanticized version of the city's history. She was born in Monterrey, Mexico, in 1918, one of 16 children. Her father was a military officer, and she told stories of him riding with Pancho Villa. In about 1924, her family moved to San Antonio by way of Laredo.²³⁰ When she was 9, she began to sing in her uncles' group, the Trio San Miguel. Like Lydia Mendoza, she was able to sing on stage because she was under the protection of male family members in a performing group.²³¹ They traveled throughout South Texas, working largely for Stout Jackson's *carpa* show in small ranch and farming towns such as Kingsville, Alice, and Falfurrias. His *El Teatro Carpo* show included the screening of Spanish-language films in large circus tents, and he hosted Mexican stars including Cantiflas, Dolores Del Rio, Tin Tan,

²²⁹*Tejano and Conjunto Music*.

²³⁰Vargas, "La Rosa," 180.

²³¹Vargas, "La Rosa," 171.

and Jorge Negrete.²³² “They thought maybe a little girl would be an attraction to the public. That’s how I started,” Fernández said in a newspaper interview.²³³

She said that having her uncles sing with her safeguarded her reputation as a young woman.²³⁴ In those days, the divide between Anglos and Mexicans seemed insurmountable. “It was hard because of the social barriers against Mexican Americans and other minorities,” she said. “I remember when I would perform with my uncles in the surrounding towns. We could not even go into the restaurants to eat when we were hungry.”²³⁵

Fernández’s mother loved to sing. Fernández’s mother, Patrita San Miguel de Fernández, was thrilled to hear her daughter’s voice for the first time on the radio. “Oh, Mama was very happy because she has a voice too,” Fernández recalled in an oral history. “All the San MIGUELS on my mother’s side had pretty voices. Every time we would go by my mama and my papa’s house, and she was singing, he [Papa] would come to the door and say ‘Your mama is singing,’ and we would wait until she finished.”²³⁶

Fernández cut her first single with the Trio San Miguel in 1931, making her one of the first Mexican American women to record. She also recorded duets with her sister

²³²Shannon, “San Antonio Tourism.”

²³³Shannon, “San Antonio Tourism.”

²³⁴Shannon, “San Antonio Tourism.”

²³⁵Vargas, “La Rosa,” 170.

²³⁶Vargas, “La Rosa,” 170.

Berta and with Laura Hernandez, as *Rosita y Laura*. She recorded for South Texas *Tejano* record companies Ideal and Falcón, and for national labels like Bluebird and RCA Victor, as well as performing with some of the most famous *orquestra* leaders such as Beto Villa and Eduardo Martínez. With her sister Berta, she recorded as *Las Dinamicas Estrellitas Duo Fernández* and *Las Hermanas Fernández*. In 1934, the duo Fernández recorded *Tres Dolores* and *Traigo un Sentimiento* for Bluebird Records at the Texas Hotel. In 1937, the Hermanas Fernández recorded *Aburrida me voy* and *Me toca peder* for Bluebird Records in Dallas. Also in 1937, Rosita Fernández recorded *Elevo el Cielo* and *El Ranchero Alfamada* with the Trio San Miguel on Vocalin (Brunswick Record Corporation).²³⁷

At age 14, in 1932, she won a talent contest sponsored by Gebhardt Chili on WOAI radio that allowed her to perform on the show for a year. She soon began to sing jingles for Frito-Lay corn chips. She earned two dollars a week for the show, sang the corn chip jingles seven days a week, and began advertising for Pearl Bear and White Wing Flour Tortillas.²³⁸ She starred in several regional radio shows from the 1930s to 1950s.²³⁹

Spanish-language radio did not yet exist when Fernández began her radio career, and no radio stations were owned by *Tejanos*. Stations tended to cut out time blocks for

²³⁷Deborah Vargas, “*La Rosa*,” 180.

²³⁸Advertising endorsements: Bread and tortillas 1950, 1975, and 1978 in Folder 11, OM5 11, Box OM1 in the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000, MS 18 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections).

²³⁹KCOR radio programs, the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000 in MS 18, Box OM1, Folder 1 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections, n.d.).

Spanish-language programming, with KCOR radio offering four hours per week of Spanish-language programming in the 1930s. When she started her career on WOAI, she was the only woman singing Spanish to a primarily English-speaking audience. By singing for radio shows whose audiences were both English and Spanish speaking, she learned to negotiate performing for two languages and cultures at a young age. Her husband, Raúl Almaguer, later translated English songs to Spanish and vice versa, creating Spanish versions of songs like “The Tennessee Waltz.”²⁴⁰

Fernández commented on the role the dual languages played in her music: “I sang a bit in English to please the American just as the *Mexicano*, and the *Mexicano* also was accustomed to American music but preferred more the music in Spanish That is what I enjoyed very much. But equally in American, and that is how I came to sing in both languages.”²⁴¹

Her image began being used for Amigo Tortillas in print advertising during this period with the slogan “‘These are my favorite tortillas’, says Rosita. San Antonio’s own star of radio, stage, and television.”²⁴²

In 1949, she performed live on the first local television program in San Antonio, broadcast from the White Plaza Hotel on WOAI-TV, an affiliate of the radio station on which she sang. Her radio background allowed her to transition smoothly into WOAI’s television station, WOAI-TV, where she performed on a weekly basis and appeared in

²⁴⁰Juan Seguin, “New Perspectives on the West” (Public Broadcasting Service, 2001), p. 180, accessed August 1, 2012, http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/seguin.htm.

²⁴¹Vargas, “La Rosa,” 182.

²⁴²Bread and tortilla ads in Folder 1, Box OM5.

numerous TV programs. She also appeared weekly on other television stations, including KTSA-TV and KCOR-TV, and at various times worked for three TV stations and 11 radio stations.²⁴³

She married Raúl Almaguer in 1938, after meeting him in an English-language class, and they had two children, Raúl Javier Almaguer and Diana Rosa Orellana. Unlike Mendoza, Chelo Silva, and Carmen Hernández whose husbands encouraged their wives to become nationally known, Almaguer did his best to force Fernández to stop performing. “I wrapped her up in cellophane and put her in the ice box,” he once commented.²⁴⁴ But when she became physically ill because she missed performing, he relented, and she continued her career but remained close to home to please him and to be near her family. He eventually became her primary public relations spokesman.²⁴⁵

Fernández made hundreds of records for RCA, Decca, and Brunswick as well as other labels. She worked with stars like Xavier Cugat, Garry Moore, Dean Martin, Joan Crawford, and Ed Sullivan. Her last solo record was *La Legendaria, San Antonio's First Lady of Song. La Rosa de San Antonio*. This album showed the influence of Agustín Lara with songs like “Granada” and “María Bonita.” The final song on the album is a remake of Bob Wills’ “San Antonio Rose,” which Vargas describes as “imbued with

²⁴³ “Rosita Fernández, ‘Rose of San Antonio,’” *Life* (June 1968).

²⁴⁴ Shannon, “San Antonio Tourism.”

²⁴⁵ Vargas, “La Rosa,” 180.

sexism and the sexualization of *Mexicanas*.” Fernández translated the lyrics and said that the song expressed her love of San Antonio.²⁴⁶

If the lyrics of the Rose of San Antonio are ethnically charged, even more so is the song of which it is an offshoot, which Fernández also sang, “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” The song is believed by some to refer to Emily Morgan, the mulatto freewoman who was captured by Santa Ana, and who, legend has it, distracted him with her lovemaking to make him lose a battle. Yellow rose refers to “high yellow,” a typical description of mulattos.²⁴⁷

Her performances were laden with symbols of Mexico. In a video of her singing with *Mariachi Internacional* in San Antonio in 1983, the show begins with mariachis in traditional dress and large hats outlined against an orange background. Fernández wears gold hoop earrings dangling to her shoulders. As she sings the words “San Antonio,” she gestures elegantly with perfectly manicured hands with long painted nails with large diamond rings on both hands. She wears a truly elaborate dress, an elegant exaggeration of the traditional folkloric costumes of Mexican dancers. It is black with a large hoop skirt, heavily embroidered with gold and white sequins. The bodice is slightly off-the-shoulder and scoop-necked, but modest and not low-cut, and an orange shawl is draped

²⁴⁶Ruthie Winegarten, Interview with Rosita Fernandez.

²⁴⁷Mark Whitelaw, *In Search of the Yellow Rose of Texas*, accessed October 3, 2012, <http://www.amaranthpublishing.com/yellow.htm>.

around her shoulders. Her hair is pulled back from her face in a long black braid which lies over her right shoulder, which she occasionally tugs or flips as she sings.²⁴⁸

In another video, “Rosita Fernández and *Campañas de America*,” she gives a brief interview in which she talks of her love for San Antonio. She flutters her false eyelashes, and gracefully tilts her head towards the interviewer, her black hair heavy in a braided chignon. In the performance that follows, she wears another heavily embellished dress, this time purple, the hoop skirt embroidered with sequins and set off by a yellow shawl. She dances a little to the mariachi music, her hand on her waist, swaying her hips modestly, and curtsies gracefully to the mariachis as they call out her name. Again, she wears long, dangly earrings and multiple large rings on her fingers. Her waist-length hair is loose and flows freely, held back from her face by a gold head band.²⁴⁹ In another performance, she wears a black and sapphire-blue dress with large hoop skirt covered with white sequins and a white scarf around her shoulders.²⁵⁰

She projected a similar image on her album covers. A photograph of her for her album “San Antonio” shows her standing in front of the Alamo in a black hoop skirt embroidered with purple and orange sequined flowers and sequined white doves, her arms encased in ruffled white sleeves, the bottom of her skirt set off by white lace. Her

²⁴⁸Anthony Medrano, “Rosita Fernández and Mariachi Internacional” (San Antonio, TX: 1983), accessed August 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r34GcrJLPk0>.

²⁴⁹Anthony Medrano, “Rosita Fernández and *Compañías de America*” (San Antonio, TX: 1983), accessed August 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13rcSMQmaSQ>.

²⁵⁰Medrano, “Somos Novios.”

hair is pulled back in an elaborate updo, and she wears an orange scarf.²⁵¹ An advertisement on Spanish TV for her 60th anniversary concert shows an older, heavier Fernández in a more traditional evening gown, still brightly colored and flowing, a combination of orange and pink, set off with high-heeled gold shoes.²⁵²

She unquestionably was conforming to a folkloric traditional stereotype of the Mexican woman in order to make money, but it seemed to be a stereotype with which she was comfortable and which rang true to her own taste and sensibilities. She became the prototype for this glamorized folkloric image of the Mexican American woman. The stereotype she played was of a beautiful, compliant Mexican woman, sweet, gentle and charming with her dimpled smile and her thick long black hair, devoted to home and family. But she played a more upper-class version of this stereotype than her actual origins, leaving behind her past as the child of poor Mexican immigrants for a more glamorous persona. Even so, she retained a humility and a sweetness in her interviews, speaking of how lucky she was to live in San Antonio\ and how privileged she was to meet such interesting people in her career.²⁵³

Fernández also successfully ventured onto the silver screen, but her movie career was limited because of her desire to stay close to home. She appeared in *Three Hundred Miles for Stephanie* with Tony Orlando, which told the story of a San Antonio policeman

²⁵¹Anthony Medrano, "Rosita Fernández: San Antonio," accessed August 15, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecsytvMO5Tw&list=PLe0HSnces_0g7hhI4wrD78CKealggTh12.

²⁵²Anthony Medrano, Commercial for concert with Rosita Fernández, accessed August 14, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbpDLsUWsCo&index=7&list=PLe0HSnces_0hr-iMZoihUp9SmUC1sP_yL.

²⁵³Medrano, "Somos Novios."

who ran 300 miles to fulfill a promise to the Virgin of San Juan in the Rio Grande Valley in hopes of saving his brain-damaged daughter.²⁵⁴ She also starred in the 1963 Disney movie, *Sancho and the Homing Steer*, based on a story by UT professor Dobie, about a couple whose lost steer makes a long trek to find his way back to the couple who raised him.²⁵⁵ She played the cantina girl opposite John Wayne in *The Alamo* (1960), a film that gave little agency or attention to Mexicans.²⁵⁶ But the made-for-TV movie *Seguin* (1982), in which she played the role of Doña Josepha, had a Texan Mexican as its hero and showed the more complicated ethnic currents in Texas.²⁵⁷

Much of Fernández's fame came not from movies or records, but from her constant presence in the performing life of San Antonio. In 1957, she began singing at the Arneson River Theater on the San Antonio River Walk and helped initiate the summer festival, *Fiesta Noche del Rio*, which included music and dance performances and at which she performed for 25 years. She also annually headlined the celebration "A Night in Old San Antonio," a part of the city's extravagant April Fiesta. From the late 1960s, she became known as San Antonio's cultural ambassador. When dignitaries came

²⁵⁴Clyde Ware (director), *Three Hundred Miles for Stephanie*, accessed November 2, 2012, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083196/>.

²⁵⁵*Sancho, The Homing Steer: The Perils of a Homesick Steer* screenplay manuscript (Walt Disney) in the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000 MS 18, Box 13 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections Box, 1959–1960).

²⁵⁶James Edward Grant (director), *The Alamo* screenplay manuscript (Hollywood, CA: Batjac Productions, 1960) in the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000, MS 18 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections).

²⁵⁷*Seguin* screenplay manuscript and cast list in the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000, MS 18, Box 13, Folder 2 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections, 1980).

to town, Fernández was called upon to make an appearance. She sang at about 80 conventions a year and performed for Pope John Paul II, Prince Charles, and five U.S. presidents²⁵⁸. Fernández sang at President Jimmy Carter's inauguration and was a favorite of President Lyndon B. Johnson and his wife Lady Bird. It was Lady Bird Johnson who gave Rosita the title "San Antonio's First Lady of Song" in 1968 at a performance for 40 ambassadors at the Arneson River Theatre²⁵⁹

“Lady Bird Johnson first said that, bless her heart,” Fernández said of her title in a *Southside Press* interview, displaying a fine example of her ability to navigate two cultures, using a southern expression that could easily have come out of the First Lady’s own mouth. The article pointed out that Fernández, though at home with presidents and ambassadors, was just as likely to perform at an opening of a new Sears and liked to be among the common people.²⁶⁰ The same year that Ladybird dubbed her “The First Lady of Song,” Fernández was named an international ambassador for Hemisphere, the World’s Fair held in San Antonio. She did all the promoting for Hemisphere, she said in an interview. “I rode on the float advertising Hemisphere in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and then went on nationally in Mexico to promote it.”²⁶¹

She retired in 1982 after entertaining for more than 60 years. She traveled abroad with her husband. At home, she continued to perform for conventions and charity events

²⁵⁸Performance programs 1952 to 1995, MS 18, the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections).

²⁵⁹Programs 1952 to 1995 in MS 18.

²⁶⁰“Singer Shunning Retirement,” *South Side Sun*, March 7, 1991.

²⁶¹“Singer Shunning Retirement.”

and was particularly involved in the *Teleton Navideño*.²⁶² She continued to appear in advertisements, and she and her husband became spokespeople for a senior citizen health insurance plan, Secure Horizons.²⁶³ She made many appearances in San Antonio, often in little Chanel suits, and she continued to work for charity after her retirement, performing in fundraisers for the March of Dimes, Brooke Army Medical Center's Burn Unit, and local churches, schools, and other organizations.²⁶⁴ Fernández raised \$8,000 for the restoration of the Arneson River Theater.²⁶⁵ She was inducted into the San Antonio's Musicians' Hall of Fame in 1979,²⁶⁶ and proclaimed Woman of the Year by Mayor Henry Cisneros in 1983.²⁶⁷ In 1984, she was inducted into the San Antonio Women's Hall of Fame.²⁶⁸ Cisneros signed a proclamation naming the Arenson River Bridge "Rosita's Bridge."²⁶⁹ Her father had helped build the bridge as part of a WPA project, so the naming of the bridge served not only as a recognition of her own

²⁶²Performance Programs 1987 to 1994 in MS 18, Box 11, Folder 5, the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections).

²⁶³Advertising Endorsements: General in MS 18, Box OM1, the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections, n.d.).

²⁶⁴Performance Programs 1975 to 1986 in MS 18, Box 11, Folder 3, the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections).

²⁶⁵Shannon, "San Antonio Tourism."

²⁶⁶Shannon, "San Antonio Tourism."

²⁶⁷Shannon, "San Antonio Tourism."

²⁶⁸"The San Antonio Women's History Coalition Honors Rosita Fernández . Plaque" in MS 18, the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections, 1978).

²⁶⁹City of San Antonio, Resolution No. 82-42-56, Passed and approved by Mayor Henry Cisneros on September 23, 1982, and Mayor Henry Cisneros to Rosita Fernández. Rosita's Bridge, 1982–1986 and n.d., the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000, MS 18, Box 12, Folder 7, (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections).

accomplishments but of her family's—a family which had made the leap from immigrant laborer to honored star in a generation.²⁷⁰

Fernández saw the naming of the bridge in her honor as a metaphor for the bridging of cultures: “We usually think of bridges as things to transport people from one side to the other. But Rostita’s bridge, I think it stands for uniting two sides, two cultures, the Mexicano and the Anglo American” she said.²⁷¹ When the bridge was dedicated, Fernández’s granddaughter, Carla María, crossed the bridge to give Fernández a bouquet of roses.

Mary McMillan Fisher wrote a children’s book entitled *Rosita’s Bridge*, which elaborates on this scene.²⁷² In the story, Fernández tells Carla María the story of her emigration from Mexico and how her father and uncles helped to build the River Walk. She tells of her own struggles on stage, in television, and in film. Before the Archbishop speaks to honor Rosita, she and Carla Maria explore the River Walk’s lush tropical foliage and plants, the stairway to the Alamo, and the graceful bridges of the River Walk. Rosita finally explains that her own bridge is a bridge between cultures.²⁷³

²⁷⁰Henry Cisneros, “Rosita’s Bridge,” 1982–1986 and undated in MS 18, Box 12, Folder 7, the Rosita Fernández Papers 1925–2000 (San Antonio, TX: University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections).

²⁷¹Vargas, “La Rosa,” 180.

²⁷²Mary McMillan Fisher, *Rosita’s Bridge* (San Antonio, TX: Maverick Publishing Company, 2001), 12.

²⁷³Fisher, *Rosita’s Bridge*.

The role that Fernández played in the mind of her admirers was made clear in the iconography of a shrine created to honor her at Mi Tierra restaurant in San Antonio²⁷⁴. The shrine consisted of a framed black and white photograph of a young Rosita in a black, off-the-shoulder dress, next to a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe, where patrons could light candles to honor both Fernández and the Virgin.²⁷⁵ That she was shown beside this image demonstrates the impression that the public had of Fernández, seeing her as an image of the ideal female as well as a symbol of Mexican womanhood. Interestingly, Mi Tierra followed a path similar to that of Fernández, from barrio restaurant to tourist institution. Mi Tierra started as a tiny café with only three tables in 1941. Owners Pete and Cruz Cortez transformed it from a café primarily serving Mercado workers into a tourist attraction with 500 tables that never closes and boasts a variety of live entertainment. The restaurant is a draw for both tourists and locals.²⁷⁶

More than any other Mexican American performer of the period, Rosita Fernández crossed class, ethnic, and gender boundaries, navigating the difficulties of performing for a bicultural audience throughout her career. She became the prototype of the glamorous Mexican American woman, helping create a new Mexican American identity. By becoming a part of San Antonio's tourism industry, she became a symbol for the city and an embodiment of the romanticized past that city promoters hoped to create. She made San Antonio the center rather than the periphery, managing a

²⁷⁴Donnatella G, "Rosita Fernández's Shrine at Mi Tierra Restaurant," San Antonio, TX: 1919 to 2006, accessed August 1, 2012, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/dedonna/158362945/>.

²⁷⁵Donnatella G, "Rosita Fernández's Shrine."

²⁷⁶"Mi Tierra Restaurant," accessed August 1, 2012, <http://www.mitierracafe.com/default.html>.

successful music and movie career in San Antonio, even though the centers of the entertainment industry were on the East and West coasts. She overcame the controlling nature of her husband, who wanted her to stop performing altogether, by compromising and working only in San Antonio. She might well have become far more famous if she had been allowed to work on a larger stage. As it was, she still managed a successful career in which she was able to reach a multi-ethnic audience-an achievement matched by few performers of her era.

CHAPTER IV

ALICIA DICKERSON MONTEMAYOR: ARTIST AND ACTIVIST ON THE
BORDER

Introduction

Alicia Dickerson Montemayor created an art of the borderlands, taking the beauty of the cactus, the birds and the mesquite she found outside her Laredo home and inscribing them with a spirituality and cultural significance that belied her lack of formal training. A folk artist who did not start painting until she was in her 70s, she made the land along the Rio Grande her subject matter and would go on to become recognized as one of the most prominent of Mexican American artists, her work shown on both sides of the border. She created a hybrid Mexican American identity through her art and work that built a foundation for Mexican American feminist creativity.

But before she was recognized as an artist, she already had gained notoriety as a pioneer in LULAC, as one of the first female national officers in the organization, as well as an outspoken feminist. She also was a businesswoman, owning her own dress shop, and a wife and mother. She even acted in several educational films. But it is her art that is her greatest legacy, and by creating a modern-day folk art of the borderlands from a feminist perspective she—a woman from the Mexican American generation—made an impact on Chicano art.

Montemayor was born in 1902 in Laredo to John Randolph Dickerson and Manuela Barrerra. Her ancestry was Native American, Irish and Mexican, a combination

which she said did not always make for a peaceful co-mingling. “I have enough Indian in me to make me want to wear a lot of jewelry, enough Irish to want to fight, and enough Mexican to get licked,” she explained in a newspaper interview.²⁷⁷

Her grandfather was an Indian from Monclova, Coahuila, Mexico, and her maternal grandparents had settled Laredo more than 200 years before. Her father, of Irish descent, was a railroad engineer for the Missouri Pacific line and he helped build the tracks from Austin and San Antonio to Laredo. “I used to spend a lot of time in the locomotive with my father,” she recalled.²⁷⁸

Montemayor attended the private school *Colegio de Guadalupe*, but graduated from Laredo High School in 1924.²⁷⁹ Judging from early materials about her life, she seems to have been outgoing and well-liked. Her high school year book, *La Pitahaya*, lists her as a basketball captain and a member of the girl’s glee club.²⁸⁰ An inscription in her yearbook said, “Alice is a good sport. One woman we all admire.”²⁸¹ Her yearbook photo shows her in white lace dress, her dark, short hair pulled back.²⁸²

²⁷⁷Kathy Vicente, “Laredo Artist Alicia Montemayor Paints from the Heart,” *Austin American-Statesman*, March 15, 1978.

²⁷⁸Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

²⁷⁹ Laredo High School, “High School Reunion Certificate” in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1974).

²⁸⁰*La Pitahaya*, in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box X, Folder X (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1923).

²⁸¹*La Pitahaya* in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 1, Folder 8 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1923).

²⁸²*La Pitahaya* in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 1, Folder 9 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1924).

As was true for fellow artist Chelo González Amezcua, Montemayor's ambitious educational and career plans were cut shut short by her father's death. Her childhood aspirations were to be an actress, a lawyer, a painter and an author.²⁸³ She had hoped to go away to college and then on to law school, but when her father died just two days before she graduated from high school, she decided to stay in Laredo to be with her mother.²⁸⁴ She attended Laredo Business College for one year and then married Francisco Montemayor, an accountant from Zacatecas, Mexico, on September 8, 1927.²⁸⁵

Dickerson—she had not yet married, of course—hardly fit the picture of a demure bride. She broke with his family's tradition regarding bridal wear, choosing a wedding suit because the couple planned to leave immediately on a wedding trip. Her mother-in-law informed her that “the tradition in our family is for the bride to wear a long white wedding gown, and we've never had any divorces in our family.” She responded: “I'm not guaranteeing I won't get a divorce if my husband doesn't treat me right.”²⁸⁶ Despite her choice of wedding attire, the marriage was a happy one, and the couple remained together for 50 years, until her husband died in 1977.²⁸⁷ They had two

²⁸³Veronica Saldivar, “Dedication Rewarded; Aspiration Comes True,” *Laredo Morning Times*, May 19, 1974.

²⁸⁴Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

²⁸⁵Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

²⁸⁶“Las Mujeres,” *Laredo Morning Times*, September 23, 1984.

²⁸⁷“Alicia Dickerson Montemayor Feels Young at 82,” *Sunday Magazine* in the *Laredo Morning Times*, July 15, 1984.

sons, Francisco, who died in an accident, and Aurelio, who is an educator in San Antonio.

Alicia Montemayor's first job was as a Western Union Desk clerk, and while working, she also took night classes at Laredo Junior College, in psychology, English and history.²⁸⁸ Then, like González Amezcua in Del Rio, she went to work for Kress Department Store's restaurant, where she stayed three years and advanced to manager.²⁸⁹ In 1934, she became a social worker for Webb County, which she described as "tremendous challenge."²⁹⁰ She was chosen because she was bilingual, and she worked to get Mexican Americans on the welfare rolls. But she was rejected by the others at her workplace because of her ethnicity. She was not permitted even a key to the office, and she met her clients outside under a tree for the first two weeks. She encountered so much hostility the welfare office actually gave her a bodyguard.²⁹¹

She spoke about this in later newspaper interviews in what appears to be a flippant light-hearted tone, but it is difficult to imagine that the experience did not engender bitterness or, at the very least, an increased awareness of prejudice and inequality.

²⁸⁸Saldivar, "Dedication Rewarded."

²⁸⁹Saldivar, "Dedication Rewarded."

²⁹⁰"Montemayor Feels Young at 82."

²⁹¹"Montemayor Feels Young at 82."

A Female LULAC Leader

Perhaps with her experience at the Webb County Welfare Office as a motivating factor, Montemayor became involved in the LULAC in the 1930s and soon rose to national prominence in the organization, shaking up many male LULAC members with her feminist sentiments. When her son Francisco, Jr. started school, Esther N. Machuca, a national organizer for women in LULAC as a charter member of Ladies LULAC 15, invited her to join the organization.²⁹² Montemayor's husband Francisco, an immigrant from Zacatecas, Mexico, was not a member, possibly because of the organization's focus on assimilation and Americanization.²⁹³

LULAC, which was founded in 1929 in Corpus Christi, has been criticized by Chicano-generation historians for its assimilationist philosophy, and a generally conservative stance promoting capitalism and individualism. Political scientist Armando Navarro even went so far as to describe LULAC as a group of "middle class Mexican Americans who organized petite-bourgeoisie patriotic service clubs dedicated to assimilation into Anglo culture."²⁹⁴ And it is true that rather than trying to undermine the structures of U.S. society, the group attempted to work within them, seeing the main enemy as racism, not the institutional structures of American society itself.²⁹⁵ LULAC

²⁹²Cynthia Orozco, "Alice Dickerson Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC in the 1930s," in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 16 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1996).

²⁹³Orozco, "Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC."

²⁹⁴Armando Navarro, *Mexicano Political Experience in Occupied Aztlán: Struggles and Change*, (Los Angeles, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 62.

members worked to create a distinction in the mind of the general public between recent Mexican immigrants and Mexican American citizens, thinking Mexican Americans would be treated better if they could distinguish themselves from the masses of new immigrants who were often less well-educated, poorer, and didn't speak English. During the 1930s, LULAC ran voter-registration drives, petitions, campaigns to repeal poll taxes, and litigation to improve the conditions of Mexican Americans. Like the NAACP, they worked on educational initiatives, including school desegregation lawsuits, such as *Del Rio v. Salvierra*, in which LULAC sued the Del Rio Independent School District for segregating according to race.

However, historians including Cynthia Orozco²⁹⁶ and Craig A. Kaplowitz²⁹⁷ have made a strong case that LULAC actually was at the forefront of the Mexican American civil rights movement in Texas during the 1930s,²⁹⁸ and I will argue that Montemayor, by her LULAC activism, was taking a strong stand for civil rights, stepping outside of conventional boundaries for a woman and working to create a hybrid Mexican American identity for women in Texas.

Journalists Clemente and Eduardo Idar were close friends of Montemayor's family, and she subscribed to Eduardo's papers *Las Noticias* and *La Prensa*. Clemente

²⁹⁵Benjamin Marquez, *Constructing Identities in Mexican American Political Organizations: Choosing Issues, Taking Sides*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 15.

²⁹⁶Orozco, *No Mexicans*, 105.

²⁹⁷Craig A. Kaplowitz, *LULAC: Mexican Americans and National Policy* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2005).

²⁹⁸Orozco, "Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC" in Box 3, Folder 16.

Idar was a labor organizer who worked for Samuel Gompers to recruit Mexican American workers to the AFL. He wrote articles in his family's paper, *La Crónica*, calling for an end to lynching Mexican Americans and he was instrumental in organizing the *Congreso Mexicanista*, the first statewide civil rights conference for Mexican Americans. He participated in activities that were far more radical than those general associated with LULAC. He had been a member of two organizations that were precursors of LULAC, the Order of the Sons of America and the Latin American Citizens League, and was made an honorary LULAC officer.²⁹⁹ These relationships, between those who took more radical paths like Tenayuca and Idar and LULAC leaders like Montemayor, demonstrate that the worlds of labor organizing, communism and radical journalism intermixed with that of LULAC during the 1930s. And although traditional interpretations which show LULAC as being a conservative organization focused on citizenship certainly have a great deal of truth in them, the picture of LULAC during this period is more complicated.

Often in her speeches and writings, Montemayor combined radicalism with more conventional concerns, talking about Mexican land loss with one breath and urging citizenship with the next. She wrote,

That the majority of us are U.S. citizens by conquest can be substantiated. Texas was not conquered. Many Texans of Mexican extraction participated in revolution. Most of these misunderstandings between the Anglos and Latins are the result of deep-rooted prejudices which have existed for centuries. It is this prejudice that LULAC is trying to destroy, not by becoming aggressive through the extent of being antagonistic, but rather by demonstrating with words and

²⁹⁹Orozco, "Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC" in Box 3, Folder 16.

deeds that we are much a part of the citizenship of the United States as of any other race.³⁰⁰

This statement shows a combination of philosophies on her part: one a more radical understanding of Texan-Mexican history; the other, the idea that Mexican Americans must prove they are fit to be good citizens.

Montemayor often took LULAC members to task for their lack of civic knowledge and awareness. “Every council should devote 10 to 30 minutes to citizenship,” she said in a speech given in 1938 or 1939 to fellow LULACers. “We pride ourselves on being a civic and patriotic organization. How many of you could get up right now and discuss intelligently the most important topics and problems of our present day history? The outstanding questions which are bearing on our daily life, which are now being brought before our congress and our state legislators? How many of us are able to participate intelligently in any discussion of our present evolution bearing on our American institutions and government? We must become thoroughly familiar with our country’s problems and assist in solving them. Today’s patriotism has less pride and more obligations. Race lies are fast disappearing.”³⁰¹

Another speech, given February 26, 1937, addresses the issue of “how we can develop members into true and loyal citizens of the U.S., helping to teach members of our race the real meaning of citizenship and by coaching them on the principles of our

³⁰⁰ Alice Dickerson Montemayor, Speeches in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 15 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁰¹ Montemayor, Speeches in Box 3, Folder 15.

American constitution and thereby assisting them to become naturalized.”³⁰² She stressed the importance of Junior LULAC members understanding the constitution, and she led the Laredo Ladies LULAC Council #15 in starting a citizenship class.³⁰³

Ladies LULAC was founded in 1933 at the Del Rio LULAC Convention. Most Ladies LULAC members came from the Mexican American middle class and had a high school diploma, if not a college degree. By 1940, the number of women’s chapters was 26, compared to 100 for the men.³⁰⁴

Montemayor was instrumental in starting a Ladies Council in Laredo in 1936. It was a small exclusive group, devoid of working class women. Members had to be recommended. They were either housewives or secretaries for the city and county and most had graduated from high school.³⁰⁵ The group performed public service, such as raising money for a Laredo orphanage, and also published an edition of LULAC News and contributed a column to the Laredo newspaper. The Laredo group was one of the most active in the state, encouraging women to vote and to work outside the home. They took up specific causes as well, such as working to gain justice for a Mexican American

³⁰²Montemayor, Speeches in Box 3, Folder 15.

³⁰³*LULAC Ladies Council Yearbook 1936–1937*, in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 12 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1937).

³⁰⁴Orozco, “Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC.”

³⁰⁰Ladies Council 15, Laredo meeting minutes, in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 15 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1937).

³¹Ladies Council 15, Laredo meeting minutes.

boy who had been brutally whipped by an Anglo teacher.³⁰⁶ The Ladies Council in Laredo appears to have worked largely independently of the men's group, and not acted as an auxiliary.³⁰⁷ Montemayor became the first secretary of the group in 1936 and president in 1938.³⁰⁸

Many of her writings and statements place a strong emphasis on women's rights and those she said she admired included strong women such as Frances Perkins, Eleanor Roosevelt, Madame Curie, Amelia Earheart, Helen Hayes, and Irene Dunn.³⁰⁹ As part of her role as secretary, she reported the local group's activities to the news column "Around the Shield." In one of her, columns she said, "We have always said, and we still maintain, that at the back of progress and success the ladies take the leading hand."³¹⁰ She soon gained attention with the national organization, and she acted as a delegate to the 1937 Houston convention and the 1938 convention in El Paso. She served as the only woman on the five-member finance committee for the Houston convention³¹¹

Between 1937 and 1940, she was elected to three national positions: second national vice president general, associate editor of *LULAC News*, and director general of Junior LULAC. The second vice president position was not set aside for a woman

³⁰⁸Orozco, "Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC" in Box 3, Folder 16.

³⁰⁹Montemayor, Speeches in Box 3, Folder 15.

³¹⁰Alicia Dickerson Montemayor, "Around the Shield" (submission to *LULAC News*) in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 16 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³¹¹Orozco, "Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC" in Box 3, Folder 16.

specifically, but after Montemayor was elected to it, it became a woman's post, held exclusively by women until 1970.³¹²

During her tenure in national office, Montemayor worked diligently for more involvement of women in LULAC and the development of more ladies' councils. She wrote more articles for *LULAC News* than any other woman in the organization's history.³¹³ Her articles were typically signed "Mrs. F.I. Montemayor." Many had an outspoken tone that caused anger among some of the male members. In one unsigned editorial, "Son Muy Hombres (?)" published in September 1938, she wrote: "A statement was made to us, in writing, by one of our high officials which reflects the attitudes by our 'Muy Hombres.'" One male LULAC member, whom she does not identify, wrote to a national officer: 'I hope president Ramón Longoria will get well soon. There are those of us who hate to be under a woman.'³¹⁴

In a January 28, 1938 letter, another LULAC leader, Juan Machuco, stressed how angry some of the men were to have a woman as a leader and urged Montemayor to control her temper.

You do not have to read his letter twice to conclude that he (unnamed) is one of those who hate to be under a woman. This tramp has a very poor opinion of you. He tears his pants, when he says 'She is a woman and may change her mind.' So check that sweet Irish temper of yours down. Make out that you don't know a thing and don't romp on him right way. Later you will have an opportunity to

³¹²Orozco, "Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC" in Box 3, Folder 16.

³¹³Orozco, "Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC" in Box 3, Folder 16.

³¹⁴Alicia Dickerson Montemayor, "Son Muy Hombres (?)" in *LULAC News* (September 1938), in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers Box 3, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1938).

give him piece of your mind, but not now. Will you do this for me? Atta Girl, I knew you would.³¹⁵

She later said in an interview in the 1980s, reminiscing about those times: “The Laredo men had no use for us. They didn’t want us and they just hated me.” She said that Ezequiel Salinas, the national president of LULAC from 1939 to 1940, who also was from Laredo, particularly hated her and that many of the men did not want to vote for her in national elections.³¹⁶

Another problem arose when the Ladies LULAC in El Paso sent three letters asking for advice, which were ignored by the national office. The ladies group eventually withdrew from the organization, though later reorganized.³¹⁷

Montemayor asked if any member would have the nerve to write an article denying the ladies’ councils equal rights and suppressing them. She wrote, “My honest opinion of those who think in that line is that they are cowardly and unfair, ignorant and narrow minded.”³¹⁸

Even in the very first article she wrote for LULAC news, she stressed the need for more women’s involvement in the organization. In “We Need More Ladies’ Councils” she said that inactive Ladies’ LULAC councils needed to get more involved:

³¹⁵Juan Machuca, Letter from Juan Machuca to Alice Dickerson Montemayor (January 29, 1938) in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1938).

³¹⁶Orozco, “Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC” in Box 3, Folder 16.

³¹⁷Montemayor, “Son Muy Hombres (?)”

³¹⁸Montemayor, “Son Muy Hombres (?)”

“To Sister LULAC, our brothers need a great big dose of competition.”³¹⁹ In another article, “A Message from the Second Vice President General,” she said that men were creating competition with the women’s LULAC because of their belief in their own superiority, but that women actually often were superior to men. “Women are possessors of a super logic” she wrote. “They hang to the truth and work with more tenacity than our brothers.”³²⁰

She praised the participation of women in the Ladies’ Councils, saying:

It is a source of great joy and pride to the womanhood that as time arches on our sisters are taking a more active part in the areas of our organization, and what is more, they are ably fulfilling the assignments which they have been given. ... The present administration has more women general officers than any of the past ones. Could this situation be attributed to the virility and broadmindedness of the western councils of our League? Gradually, but surely, you women are fulfilling the part which destiny has aped out for them in the evolution of our worthy organization.³²¹

She often took strong positions in favor of women’s rights, stepping outside of the conventional behavior of women in LULAC, which tended to be in a more supportive role in the background to the male leaders. She spoke on women’s role in politics at the funeral of LULAC’s first president, Ben Garza, and defended the power and intelligence of women, saying “In truth women are not only intelligent, but they have a monopoly on certain forms of intelligence. History has shown clearly that women

³¹⁹Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “We Need More Ladies’ Councils,” *LULAC News*, undated, in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 17 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³²⁰Alice Dickerson Monetamayor, “A Message from the Second Vice President General,” *LULAC News* in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 17 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³²¹Montemayor, “A Message” in Box 3, Folder 17.

have decided the larger questions of life correctly and quickly, not because they are lucky guessers, not heavenly inspired, but because they have sense. Women are the realists of the race, and they are able to see at a glance and penetrate into in seconds what most men would not see with a telescope aimed at eternity.”³²² In October 1937, she wrote an article entitled "Women's Opportunity in LULAC," in which she defined a woman's place to be "in that position where she can do the most for the furthering of her fellow women.”³²³

In another article, she wrote that

A women's place is where they are suited best. What men call a hunch, women call intuition, and this is a characteristic God deprived women of. In the future, there must be councils in each city where there is a Latin element, one men's council, one women's council and a junior council. ... Women can someday constitute their work that they can reach the presidency general. Women, God's most precious gift to men. Home is no longer the place for women, in this day and age.³²⁴

She thought women's involvement was key to the organization's success and urged women to join the group: "Ladies, do join and work for LULAC, for when more women join our organization, the members of our race will profit and our organization will prosper.”³²⁵

³²²“Montemayor Feels Young at 82.”

³²³Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “Women's Opportunity in LULAC,” *LULAC News* (October 1937) in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 5 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1937).

³²⁴Montemayor, “Women's Opportunity.”

³²⁵Montemayor, “Women's Opportunity.”

Montemayor's other chief focus was getting youth more organized and forming youth councils. In 1938, she began writing essays urging the formation of more youth councils including "Let's Organize Junior Councils,"³²⁶ "Ten Reasons Why,"³²⁷ and "Why and How More Junior Councils,"³²⁸ in which she argued that it was important for youth to become involved in LULAC so they could be trained in citizenship and leadership. She organized councils at her house, recruiting both boys and girls, and urged them to leave behind the petty egotism and jealousies of the men's and ladies' councils.³²⁹ She taught them debate and acting.³³⁰ It was she who organized the first Junior LULAC and served as its president general in 1939–40. She wrote the first Junior LULAC charter and, on October 24, 1937, organized a coed youth group intended to set an example to adult LULAC members.³³¹

She appears to have left LULAC around 1940, but because there are many missing issues of *LULAC News* in the 1940s, it is not clear exactly when she left or why, although it seems likely the animosity she received from many might have played a role.

³²⁶Alice Dickerson Montemayor, "Let's Organize Junior Councils," in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 17 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³²⁷Alice Dickerson Montemayor, "Ten Reasons Why," in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 17 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³²⁸Alice Dickerson Montemayor, "Why and How More Junior Councils," in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 17 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³²⁹Montemayor, "Why and How" in Box 3, Folder 17.

³³⁰Montemayor, "Let's Organize" in Box 3, Folder 17.

³³¹Orozco, "Montemayor and the Feminist Challenge to LULAC" in Box 3, Folder 16.

“I was a very controversial person” she said in an interview in the 1980s.” Many men did not want women involved in LULAC. The men just hated me. I guess men just don’t think women can do anything.”³³²

In June 1937, *LULAC News* wrote of her: “No wonder she has been cussed, discussed, lied about, lied to, boycotted and almost hung, but she claims she has stayed in there, first because she is a LULACer and next because she wanted to see what would happen next.”³³³

While working idealistically to achieve greater civil rights for Mexican Americans, Montemayor came up against sexism among her own group and she fought it, standing up for equal rights not only for Mexican Americans but also for women. The exact role that the Ladies’ Councils played in developing a greater awareness of women’s rights in Montemayor and other members is not always easy to determine. As Cynthia Orozco points out, the women were “more likely to pour punch than to throw a punch.”³³⁴ Orozco addresses the issue of the gendering of the Ladies Councils, pointing out that male fraternalism was important to the organization, and that a certain amount of exclusion and boundary setting is crucial to the identity politics of social movements. Orozco asks the question whether these ladies groups existed simply because the men excluded the women and were an affirmation of LULAC’s masculine character, or on

³³²“Montemayor Feels Young at 82.”

³³³“Montemayor’s Contribution to LULAC” *LULAC News* (June 1937) in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1937).

³³⁴Orozco, *No Mexicans*, 209.

the other hand, if female segregation was a strategy of empowerment on the part of the women themselves.³³⁵

Without question, women often were excluded from the main activities of LULAC and seen as homemakers and supporters of men rather than leaders. But even though the purpose of the Ladies Councils may have been to exclude rather than to empower women, the fact of women's participation in this social movement did in fact empower them. And even the obstacles they faced within the organization, seemed to create in some, like the women of the El Paso Ladies Council and Montemayor, a stronger desire to gain power in their own right long before the dawn of a Chicana feminist identity.

While I do not agree with historian Estelle Freeman that these organizations were "separation as strategy,"³³⁶ I think that historian Blanche Weisen Cook's point has validity: that women's groups created networks of support that women needed to conduct political work.³³⁷ Orozco is on the mark in saying that separatism implies a level of feminist consciousness that most LULAC women did not have at that point.³³⁸ Although Orozco points out that Montemayor never urged integration of the sexes

³³⁵Orozco, *No Mexicans*, 210.

³³⁶Estelle Freedman, "Separation as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870 to 1930," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 515–16.

³³⁷Blanche Weisen Cook, "Female Support Networks and Political Activism: Lilian Wald, Chrystal Eastman, Emma Goldman," *Chrysalis* 3 (1977): 43–61.

³³⁸Orozco, *No Mexicans*, 209.

within LULAC,³³⁹ it does seem that the fact that she argued for the integration of youth councils in order to avoid the petty jealousies and rivalries plaguing the men's and ladies councils that she did see some problem in separation.

Montemayor took the same strength and determination she had brought to LULAC into the business and civic world of Laredo, and in 1937, she opened a dress shop, but the business apparently failed. Between 1951 and 1956, she operated another one.³⁴⁰ In 1956, the Laredo Independent School District asked her to substitute for the registrar. She eventually became permanent registrar, and she continued working at L.J. Christen Junior High School as registrar until 1972.³⁴¹ She was active in the community, in particular in Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, the church where she had married and was a lifelong member. She served as organist, taught catechism classes, assisted with festivals, and organized the first youth choir. "It was very gratifying to me to have the opportunity to help a lot of youngsters, especially when I taught CCd and trained altar boys," she said. In 1951, she received a pontifical blessing for her work with the church.³⁴²

³³⁹Orozco, *No Mexicans*, 209.

³⁴⁰"Montemayor Feels Young at 82."

³⁴¹Kathy Ariana, "Montemayor's Painting Life," *Arriba*, August 3, 1975.

³⁴²Ariana, "Montemayor's Painting Life."

Creating a Folk Art for the Borderlands

Not until 1974, when she was in her seventies, did what she describes as the turning point in her life occur.³⁴³ While her husband was ill, her son Aurelio advised her to take up painting to occupy her time while she took care of her husband and adjusted to her own retirement. Long an avid gardener, she began to paint on gourds that she grew in bright, varied colors. By 1976, her son urged her to begin painting with acrylics, which she did, first on tin, then on Masonite. By 1978 she was painting on frames she designed herself, the colors often exuberantly splashing over to the frames themselves. She first signed her work “Mom” and then “Admonty.”³⁴⁴

Her painting career began at the height of the Chicano Art movement, when artists such as Santa Barraza were gaining fame for depictions of native Virgin of Guadalupe in bright colors surrounded by Aztec and Maya writing, and Carmen Lomas Garza was becoming known for her scenes of South Texas Mexican American life, documenting customs like tamale making and Easter celebrations. Some saw in Montemayor a Mexican American Grandma Moses, a comparison she rejected. “We paint from very different ideas,” she said. “I’m untrained, not primitive. I think [my art] is folk art.’

Others compared her work to that of Frida Kahlo for its depiction of women and nature, but Montemayor said she had not heard of Kahlo when she began painting³⁴⁵ and

³⁴³Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

³⁴⁴Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

³⁴⁵Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

said that she had “no influences” although she likened her own work to that of the Russian-French painter Marc Chagall and said she admired Leonardo da Vinci, El Greco, and the early works of Pablo Picasso.³⁴⁶

Her art is shot through the beauty, strength and spirituality of women, and it is very much in the style of Mexican folk art with its bright colors, simple lines, emphasis on nature, and the daily lives and customs of common people. Women and nature are at the center of her art. The paintings show women seeming to gain strength, spirituality and sustenance from nature, and in turn imposing the feminine on a natural world that seems to be born from the figures of these women. Her art also depicts traditional Mexican customs, such as *posadas* and nativity scenes.

Montemayor had the confidence to paint what was around her, to see the beauty in the desert scrub brush along the Rio Grande near Laredo. Like Jovita González writing about the scenery of the borderlands, Montemayor did not try to impose a more European or American style on the subject matter of the borderlands. She painted what she saw without alluding to the themes and concerns of male-dominated European art. She also painted her own customs and people. The beauty that she saw in her backyard as she looked out over the Tex-Mex tracks that her father helped build, watching the birds come to her feeder, were subjects for her art, as were the customs and social life she encountered at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church and in her hometown of Laredo.

³⁴⁶Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

Like González Amezcua, Montemayor used the themes of her Mexican heritage, but she differed from González Amezcua in that instead of painting idealized Spanish and Moorish dream worlds, she painted the world right outside her door: the yucca, the cactus, and the Christmas customs of her neighbors. Her style also takes less from the Spanish influences on her art than it does from the Mexican. And while González Amezcua's filigreed castles and Spanish princes hark back to old Spain, Montemayor's are solidly within the tradition of Mexican folk art. Although she does not claim Mexican influence, there is an undeniable resemblance to the folk art she would have seen in Laredo as well as in her travels throughout Mexico. Many of her paintings resemble Mexican *ex-voto* paintings in their style. These paintings often give thanks for a miracle and tell the story surrounding it, portraying simple depictions of natural scenes that show how the miracle occurred. Like Montemayor's paintings, *ex-votos* also often are painted on tin.³⁴⁷

Her painting also bears similarities to Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera, Alfredo Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Juan O'Gorman in her use of bright colors and depiction of indigenous Mexican themes. In her travels throughout Mexico, she doubtless saw the work of Mexican muralists and other Mexican artists. Unlike the muralists, her art was not overtly political. However, in depicting women and scenes from everyday life, she did make a statement about the importance of women and of Mexican American customs. Many of her paintings are untitled and have been lost, only

³⁴⁷“Mexican Retablos: 19th Century Devotional Art,” accessed January 23, 2011, <http://Mexicanretablos.com>.

available as slides at the Benson Latin American Collection; only a few are in private collections.

Some paintings show an intriguing juxtaposition between the borderlands and the rich vibrant world of deeper interior Mexico where her husband was from and which she frequently visited, having spent time in cities including Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Acapulco, Monterrey, and Saltillo.³⁴⁸ One painting (acrylic on Masonite)³⁴⁹ shows a dark-haired woman in a blue dress standing by a window surrounded by flowers, looking out at a toucan looking in. The woman seems to be looking from her Laredo world into the heart of a richer more tropical landscape just across the border, perhaps communicating with the indigenous Mexican past of which Montemayor was so proud. A similar painting “La Mesa de María” (acrylic on Masonite)³⁵⁰ shows a woman in a red skirt and long-sleeved lace blouse standing near a window, with oranges and lemons hanging down beside the walls framing her, a tropical cornucopia in a middle class American house.

³⁴⁸Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁴⁹Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “Untitled I,” Sketches and paintings in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 21 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁵⁰Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “La Mesa de María,” Slides 30 and 31 in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 19 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

In another, entitled “Ariana,”³⁵¹ a woman in white dress with a red sweater and jacket stands beside a pond, encapsulated by a wintry South Texas landscape beside a red blooming plant beneath a tree. The woman seems at one with the cool landscape, a feeling of joy surrounding her as though she might be swept up into the wispy clouds and out into the very boundaries of the frame onto which Montemayor has allowed the paint to spill so exuberantly.

Many of Montemayor’s paintings depict the plants and landscapes of the border with great vibrancy. In “The Birds and the Cacti,” a woman stands beside the Rio Grande alongside the native plants of the region, a yucca and cactus, next to a tree full of birds, the river and sky behind them.³⁵² Some of the landscapes depict border people going about their work or daily life. “*Los Sembradores*,” one of her largest paintings, shows men and women working in a garden with mountains in the background, her typically swirling sky, and many small figures performing their daily rituals.³⁵³ Another depicts workers among the agave plants.³⁵⁴ One journalist described Montemayor’s

³⁵¹Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “Ariana,” Slides 12–14 in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 19 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁵²Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “The Birds and the Cacti,” Slide 15 in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 19 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁵³Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “*Los Sembradores*,” Slide 2 in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 19 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁵⁴Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “Untitled II,” Sketches and paintings in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 21 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

subject matter as being essentially “*temas de la gente*, or themes of the people.”³⁵⁵ These themes of the people can be seen in paintings such as one that shows workers in white *campesino* clothing laboring in a field, a woman singing under blooming trees beside a small house with mountains in the backgrounds.³⁵⁶ Her art often depicts humble people enjoying humble activities.

Like Jovita González, Montemayor inscribes the native plants and landscape with a spiritual and mystical quality. The plants and landscape near Laredo’s Rio Grande become normative, and the viewer is drawn into a world of low brown hills, dusky green cactus, and winter-blooming flowers. The geology and the plant life of the borderlands become the basis for her art, so that she truly creates an art of the borderlands, not only in subject matter but in the Mexican folk art style she adopted, with its sometimes stylized figures, bright colors and simple forms. In “Lady Sasha” (acrylic on Masonite),³⁵⁷ woman’s connection with the nature of the borderlands is brought out.

White flowers are common in Montemayor’s paintings. In one, a dark-haired woman stands beneath a tree blooming white with blossoms, possibly a tortuously bent wild olive tree common in the area, and she wears a necklace of white flowers around her neck. Montemayor said in interviews that she used symbolism but did not explain

³⁵⁵Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

³⁵⁵Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

³⁵⁶Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “Untitled III,” Additional sketches and paintings in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 19. (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁵⁷Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “Lady Sasha,” Slide 19 in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 19 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

her meanings to those questioning her.³⁵⁸ She did say that many of her paintings came from dreams and visions.³⁵⁹ The swirling vibrancy of her brushstrokes makes the landscapes come alive. Most often, the paintings show border woman, who, like Montemayor, are enriched and enlarged by the landscape and the unusual beauty of the natural world that surrounded them.

In one work entitled “Whispering Lake,”³⁶⁰ a woman in yellow is sitting beside a lake amongst blooming flowers. The lake seems to move and take on a life of its own, sweeping the woman up into a magical secretive world. Another powerful painting shows a dead forest.³⁶¹ A woman in white dances across the red earth amongst the pale dead trees tree stumps, seeming to do a dance of grief. Her long hair flows behind her onto the blue frame, giving the painting an eerie quality. This could have been a comment on environmental devastation or simply an expression loneliness and sorrow spilling out from the woman into the larger natural world. The barrenness of the landscape seems to echo the devastation within the woman and yet still she is dancing, almost seeming as though the fury of her dancing will bring back vitality and life to the natural world.

³⁵⁸Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁵⁹Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁶⁰Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “Whispering Lake”, Slide 4 in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 19 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁶¹Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “The Dead Forest,” Slides 26–28 in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 21 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

Montemayor was devoted to St. Francis, and his idea of the holiness of nature imbued her paintings. She said that when she woke up every morning, she said the following prayer to St. Francis: “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love, where there is injury pardon. Where there is despair hope, darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy.”³⁶²

Montemayor loved to watch the birds at her birdbath and described herself as fascinated by birds, which often played a role in her art. She would often ring a bell in her backyard to let the birds know they had a treat of wild bird seed or cornbread coming.³⁶³ She did several paintings of parrots and other birds as the main subject, and they often were part of her paintings.³⁶⁴

One newspaper article described her spiritual practice like this: “Every day, she does a little meditation, reads the Catholic Bible and thanks God for another day. She lets God know that her happiness comes from within, and she accepts it gladly. She is a strong Leo woman, a lioness.”

Several journalists who interviewed her seemed interested in her spiritual practices, her diet, and her astrological profile, indicative perhaps of the priorities of journalists in the 1970s. She told them that while not a vegetarian, she did not eat much red meat and felt that being extremely careful about nutrition was the basis for her

³⁶²Gregg Stephens, “Native Art Varied, Vibrant,” *Laredo News*, August 1, 1982.

³⁶³Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁶⁴Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

³⁶⁴Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

health.³⁶⁵ But anyone hoping to find a counterculture spiritual heroine was quickly put in their place. Montemayor admitted to one addiction, nicotine, and was a chain smoker.³⁶⁶ And just after talking about her love of birds and St. Francis, she told a reporter that she painted with religious programs on the TV in the background, and always had the TV on for background noise, shattering any notions of a quiet, contemplative life.³⁶⁷

As a mature female artist, she did not let others define her any more than she had during her days working with the welfare office or with LULAC. She was unassuming and easily extricated herself from attempts by interviewers to draw her into high-minded conversations about art. “I’ve never taken lessons,” she said. “I just do what I can and don’t worry about it. I form a little story in my head and that is all I know.”³⁶⁸

She knew that some thought that painting with acrylics rather than oil was inferior but did not care. “I know that it will take 100 years or more before acrylic painting will be accepted as oil painting is today. I couldn’t care less, and neither do I care or try to paint in manner of the so-called traditional painters. I want to paint my way, and that’s what I have done.”³⁶⁹ She simply did not feel that her lack of some of the skills and training of a traditional painter mattered.

³⁶⁵Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

³⁶⁶Amy Dawes, “Vibrant Artist, Vibrant Works,” *Laredo Morning Times*, March 14, 1986.

³⁶⁷Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁶⁸Dawes, “Vibrant Artist.”

³⁶⁹Dawes, “Vibrant Artist.”

“I can’t draw a straight line,” she said. “But I don’t feel that is necessarily important. I feel that an artist needs only emotion and guts to succeed in painting. You have to paint from the heart. If I had studied formally, I would probably get into an argument with the instructor over technique. I took it up so late in life, but if I can do it anyone can.”³⁷⁰ She said she did not explain her paintings in esoteric terms but is delighted by what she paints: “That’s what it is all about isn’t it? Art is about painting what makes you happy and giving your feelings a form of expression.”³⁷¹

In one of her paintings, a clown is singing. An interviewer asked her if he is playing the organ and piano, and she replied, “No honey. I don’t have room for it. In my imagination he does. And the singer always ends up in the program with ‘Pennies from Heaven.’”³⁷²

In another painting, “*El Retiro*,”³⁷³ she explains that there originally was another woman on the canvas, but they had a fight and one of the women decided to leave, and she is now on the other side of the painting.³⁷⁴ Another painting that shows her humor, “*Hombres Necios*,”³⁷⁵ is a polychromatic art work that she says demonstrates the

³⁷⁰Dawes, “Vibrant Artist.”

³⁷¹Dawes, “Vibrant Artist.”

³⁷²Stephens, “Native Art Varied.”

³⁷³Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “*El Retiro*,” Additional sketches and paintings in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 21 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁷⁴Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

inquisitive nature of men. It depicts a mountain swimming hole with curious onlookers. A sign says “Women Only,” but the men are standing close by, trying to peer in. Another, taken from a scene she saw on Town Lake in Austin, shows a small bird being chased by a dog and growing into a giant angry bird.³⁷⁶

“I see things and people in my imagination, and I paint them,” she said.” I have a lot of fantasy in me, and I take those things plus what I remember and put them on canvas.”³⁷⁷ Though her artwork was the form of creativity for which she would get the most recognition, it was not the only creative expression she engaged in. She also played the church organ, embroidered, gardened, cooked, took photographs, made shrunk apple faces, crocheted, and made rag dolls.³⁷⁸ “Gardening and embroidery take second place,” she said. “Painting is my life now. It’s gotten so that if my plants dry up, I don’t even cry.”³⁷⁹

She chose not to accept commissions because she liked to paint what she chose, using her fantasy and imagination.³⁸⁰ She enjoyed doing ball-point pen sketches of people’s faces in crowds, constantly aware of and sensitive to her environment.³⁸¹

³⁷⁵Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “*Hombres Necio*,” Slide 3 in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 21 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁷⁶Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁷⁷Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁷⁸Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁷⁹Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁸⁰Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

Photos in later years show her in large glasses, pearl earrings and necklace over knit sweaters, her long hair in a bun. One newspaper article described her, at 83, as “as unique as the town she lives in. She paints on an easel in a cluttered sunny den in of the house near the Tex-Mex railroad tracks where she was born and raised. “I pray, cry, and paint in the den,” she said.³⁸²

The article described her as speaking precise English spiced with Spanish words, chain smoking, and remaining stubbornly primitive in her approach to art. “All I know is how to spell the word,” she said.³⁸³ She never used sketches but painted directly from her heart and imagination.³⁸⁴

Some of her paintings show the customs of the area, often religious customs such as *posadas* or *nacimientos*. In “*El Nacimiento*,”³⁸⁵ (acrylic on Masonite), a golden light suffuses the painting, showing a boy and a girl standing in front of a nativity scene. The location being Laredo, outside the window is not snow but blooming flowers.

Montemayor explained her love of painting nativity scenes in one newspaper interview:

Ever since I remember I grew up knowing this as a family tradition and the Barrerra and Dickerson families put up the *nacimiento* December 16 through 24. In Hispanic homes, we start with *El Misterio*, St. Joseph and the Virgin, and we

³⁸¹Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁸²Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

³⁸³Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

³⁸⁴Ariana, “Montemayor’s Painting Life.”

³⁸⁵Alice Dickerson Montemayor, “El Nacimiento,” Slides 5–7 in the Alice Dickerson Montemayor Papers, Box 3, Folder 23 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

have the *posadas*. This painting was a replica of our first Christmas together. At the time, 1928, we were expecting our first child. I never broke family tradition of setting up the *nacimiento*. I recall that as we were putting up the nativity scene and Christmas tree, I was wishing that my expected child would be a boy and our next child would be a busy girl. The little girl never came. My beloved son Aurelio came instead.³⁸⁶

She remembered *posadas*, Christmas carols, and the tamale suppers that were held after church services and the pleasure she took in painting these remembered scenes.

I used to take my choir and altar boys caroling. The sheriff would supply us with a city bus and we went to the hospitals, shut-in homes, etc. The kids and I used to have a lot of fun. The last carol was called the *posada* and we would ask for shelter. The boys carried a Virgin and Joseph. There were many religious festivals in Laredo. By 1960, Aurelio decided that putting up a *nacimiento* was a priority. Now I spend Christmases at Aurelio's, and he decorates his apartment and keeps up a family tradition of a joyous Christmas tradition.³⁸⁷

She told interviewers she had learned life's lessons, to accept the cyclical nature and inevitable course of life. Her father died when she was young; her elder son died in an accident' and her husband, whom she described as sweet, elegant and calm, died after a long illness. One journalist said these experiences had "made her a strong realistic person aware of the power of nature and human emotion."³⁸⁸

"Now my golden years are so beautiful, I am so happy now that I am old," she told one journalist.³⁸⁹ She told admirers that the secret to a long life was a healthy diet, staying busy and having young friends, as well as staying close to nature and following

³⁸⁶Vicente, "Paints from the Heart."

³⁸⁷Vicente, "Paints from the Heart."

³⁸⁸Vicente, "Paints from the Heart."

³⁸⁹Vicente, "Paints from the Heart."

along the path of St. Francis and the wisdom of his teaching.³⁹⁰ “If you add up the pluses and minuses in life, the pluses outweigh everything,” she said.³⁹¹ One journalist summed it up this way: “She never had money, but in her mind she’s been rich all along.”³⁹²

Her work was shown in a variety of venues from small local galleries to major exhibitions. In August, 1978, the League of United Chicano Artists of Austin sponsored a solo exhibition of her work at Juárez-Lincoln University. In November 1979, she had another show at the *Instituto Cultural Mexicano* in San Antonio. She also exhibited her work in Mission, Laredo, Chicago, Mexico, and Riverside, California. In 1988, she was the subject of a presentation at the Fifty-ninth Annual LULAC Convention and at the Smithsonian Institution.³⁹³ She died on May 13, 1989, and is buried at the Catholic Cemetery in Laredo.

Creating her Own Paradigm and Forging a Hybrid Identity

Montemayor created art that sprang from the borderlands and that portrayed the world near Laredo. Her art was a borderlands art both in its Mexican style and its South Texas subject matter. She painted the land around her, its vegetation, its geological features, its unique skies and cloud formations, its birds. She also painted the customs of its people and a style of Mexican folk art, using the bright colors and simple figures of

³⁹⁰Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁹¹Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁹²Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

³⁹³Vicente, “Paints from the Heart.”

an *ex-voto* painting and bringing in the customs and natural world together in a manner common in Mexican folk art.³⁹⁴

In Montemayor's art, the periphery unquestionably became the center. Like Jovita González, for Montemayor the world of the borderlands was normative. For her, the plants, landscapes, and customs of the people were what was worth painting. Her visions and dreams sprang out of the natural world South Texas. In her art, what to many would seem the peripheral world of the customs and landscapes of Laredo became the center. She did not feel the need to import European methods or themes but was intrigued with those she found on the Texas-Mexico border.

Montemayor began her life in a mix of cultures within her own family. She was part Irish and part Mexican American. At a time when whiteness and Americanization were being lauded by an aspirational Mexican American class, she claimed an Indian grandfather from Mexico. It would have been easy enough for Montemayor to stress the "Dickerson" of her maiden name and to go by Alice instead of Alicia. Instead, she actively chose to identify with her Mexican American side. She married a Mexican man from one of the great colonial silver mining cities of Mexico—Zacatecas.

Her decision to become involved in fighting for Mexican American civil rights through LULAC was an important one. Whether she could have truly chosen to identify as an Anglo in Laredo at this time, given her experience of exclusion while working at the Webb County welfare office during the Great Depression, seems doubtful. Any

³⁹⁴Sandra Jordan, "Alice Dickerson Montemayor" in *Folk Art in Texas*, ed. Francis Edward Abernethy (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), 42.

fluidity she might have had in choosing an identity was likely sealed by her marriage to a man from Mexico. Yet she still could have made different choices, stressing her whiteness, like Jovita González did. Instead, she worked in the trenches of the Mexican American civil rights movement in its early days. She worked in a very deliberate way to forge a Mexican American identity for herself and to create more possibilities for Mexican American women. In her writings for *LULAC News* and other publications, she spoke out about the strength of women. At a time when few Anglo women were saying that women were the equal of men, she actually was claiming that women were superior.

She crossed boundaries of conventional gender roles in both Anglo and Mexican American culture. When men in LULAC were stressing that LULAC women needed to keep a proper appearance and a spotless home, Montemayor was arguing that women should get more involved in the fight for equal rights, for both Mexican Americans and for women. She pushed back against the role of demure Mexican American woman, from her refusal to wear her mother-in-law's bridal gown to her fiery letters to LULAC leaders. By crossing the boundaries of conventional behavior, she carved out a fresh space for Mexican American women in LULAC by urging the creation of more Ladies Councils, more women's involvement in the organization in general and by working for the creation of co-ed youth groups. By being the first national officer and one of the first and most prolific writers for LULAC publications, she was able to set a precedent for women's involvement in LULAC, even creating an office that would be held by a woman for decades after she left it.

Her work was essential in forming a new Mexican American identity for women. Not only did she strive to create a woman's role that was activist and outspoken, she also delineated a role that would work to serve others, like her group did when they fought to get justice for the Laredo boy who had been whipped in school and when they raised money to help a local orphanage. She moved outside of conventional roles for a Mexican American woman in LULAC, stepping out of the shadows and into the forefront of leadership. She also breached the conventional roles of Anglo women for her time, with her outspoken editorials and fiery missives to organization leaders.

She ignored conventional roles in many aspects of her life. Though a wife and mother who fulfilled the gender normative roles of church organist and catechism teacher, she also was a career woman. She worked outside the home from the times she graduated from high school, for the welfare office and as a school registrar, for Western Union and as a restaurant manager at Kress department stores. She also made several forays into the business world, owning two dress shops, unusual for a woman in her time. More educated than many women during this period, especially Mexican American women, she attended some college and continued to take night classes at a community college.

In her art, she also was a risk-taker and a boundary breaker. Daring to take up a new form of expression in her seventies, her art was not just a hobby. She followed through with art shows and exhibitions and interviews in the press, creating a degree of renown for herself as an artist. This is no small feat at any age.

Her paintings of women put just as much importance on the importance of the feminine as when she was working to develop more Ladies Councils in LULAC. By portraying women's relationship with nature, she depicted Mexican American women as powerfully aligned with the great forces of the natural world, rather than according to the stereotypes prevalent in both Anglo and Hispanic cultures, which showed women as decorative dolls, objects of male desire or subservient workers.

She broke with convention by having the nerve to paint in her own distinctive style, to value *Mexicanidad* and the folk art style that few regarded as prestigious at the time. Even the spirituality that imbued her art was boundary-breaking. Although a church-going Catholic, she also had her own distinctive brand of spiritual seeking that was individualistic and that was expressed in her love of St. Francis, nature, and birds. She imbued her art with this woman- and nature-centered spirituality, quite unconventional for the time.

She also brought a transnational perspective to her life and work. With a Mexican Indian grandfather and a Mexican husband, she built a life in a border town and traveled widely in Mexico. Her world was broader than just one country.

I have asked the question throughout this dissertation of whether women became freer as they embraced this new hybrid identity of Mexican American. Montemayor certainly considered herself to be free. When asked in an interview, if she was a liberated person, she said she always had been.³⁹⁵ And certainly, some of her freedom and daring simply sprang from her personality. But she also gained freedom as she forged new

³⁹⁵Vicente, "Paints from the Heart."

pathways, establishing a Mexican American identity for herself and others. By creating an individualistic artistic style that was both self-expressive and valuing of *Mexicandidad*, she was able, in her later years, to create a new life for herself, gaining much admiration and some fame.

By forging paths for women within LULAC as a younger woman, she opened new horizons for herself, of travel and relationships as well as of powerful forms of expression through speaking and writing. By embracing both her American and her Mexican identities, she was able to create a sense of self and to become a woman bound by few rules.

She created her own paradigm rather than working to fit into other people's ideas of what she should be. She was a woman who was political but also spiritual; a wife and mother while a career woman, and an artist who followed her own unique visions. Though taken up and admired by the Chicano art movement, she remained separate, not trying to fulfill any politically correct idea of what a Chicana artist should be. She stayed true to her own vision, painting clowns, and yucca by the Rio Grande, and angry birds chasing dogs. She did not fit into the mold of idealized Chicano artist just as she did not embrace traditional European and American art forms. She was able to make the rules herself and was instrumental in creating new possibilities for Mexican American women in both art and life.

She became a crossroads for varying ideologies within LULAC, in which ideas about citizenship and Pan Americanism joined with more radical ideals of school desegregation and fundamental egalitarianism. She became a crossroads for

conventional Mexican American women who were moving into a more political sphere. And she also became a crossroads between the Anglo art world and the world of Mexican folk art, putting forth her own unique border vision for audiences who may not have been familiar with the art of Mexico. She also acted as a bridge between the Mexican American and Chicano generation, bringing ideas of Mexican identity forged in the mid-century into the Chicano era.

Montemayor blazed a new path for women in LULAC, and also created a woman-centered Mexican-American artistic expression. By breaking boundaries of gender and ethnicity, she created a distinctive borderlands art that expressed her unique brand of spirituality and power, an art that was truly both Mexican and American. Through these accomplishments, she forged her own identity, a hybrid creation that could only have arisen from the Texas borderlands.

CHAPTER V

CHELO GONZÁLEZ AMEZCUA: SELF-TAUGHT ARTIST OF THE
BORDERLANDS

Introduction

Consuelo “Chelo” González Amezcua lived a quiet, insular life of creativity in a small border town, receiving no recognition outside her hometown until she was in her sixties. Though far from being an outspoken activist like Alice Dickerson Montemayor or a performer like Rosita Fernández, González Amezcua quite unconventional was in her own way. She broke boundaries of her own culture by daring to live as a single woman, making her own living working at as a *dulcerea*, or candy seller, at a department store, drawing with pen and ink in her limited spare time. But her imagination did not know the limitations of her circumstances. She created a distinctive art of the borderlands, born of both U.S. and Mexican influences. A self-taught artist who drew on small scraps of paper and cardboard she found around the house, González Amezcua never married and worked as a clerk at the S.H Kress store in Del Rio for much of her life, selling candy and popcorn.

She labored quietly, privately, for many years, thriving in an elaborate world of her own creation, filled with the art and poetry she made in her off hours. Inspired by her own individualistic and idiosyncratic vision, her drawings displayed a wide range of interests, from Islamic architecture to pre-Colombian history to nature. They also were inspired by her mystical spirituality. In fact, her drawing technique was similar to the

automatic drawing that the surrealists and spiritualists implemented to tap into the collective unconscious. González Amezcua referred to this process as “mental drawing.”³⁹⁶ Amy Freeman Lee, a San Antonio art educator, first brought González Amezcua’s work to a larger audience when the artist was in her sixties. She became known as a Mexican-American naïve or “outsider” artist and her work was a precursor to artists of the Chicano generation like Santa Barraza and Carmen Lomas Garza.

González Amezcua was bicultural and knew her native Mexico well, although her family immigrated to Texas when she was only 10.³⁹⁷ Though living in the United States, her work was distinctly shaped by the art and themes of Mexico and by the history of Spain—particularly its Moorish past. She longed to study at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City, where Diego Rivera and other famous Mexican artists had studied and taught. She wrote to the president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas, asking for a scholarship to the prestigious academy and was granted one. But the death of her father three days after she received word of winning the award prevented her from going, and she stayed home and took a job selling candy at the S.H. Kress store.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁶Nancy Newton, “Lush Inner Life in a Dry Border Town,” *Raw Vision Magazine* 3, no. 71 (1985), accessed September 15, 2012, <http://www.rawvision.com/>.

³⁹⁷McNay Art Museum, “Exhibit Catalogue” in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 1, Folder 14 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

³⁹⁸“Local Artist Amezcua Was Self-Taught,” *Del Rio News Herald*, June 14, 1969.

She identified strongly with both the U.S. and Mexico and traveled widely in Mexico, drawing the architecture, the pyramids, and writing odes to Mexican cities such as Mérida, The White City of the Yucatan Peninsula.³⁹⁹

Born on June 13, 1903 in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico, in 1913 she moved to Del Rio, Texas, with her family—at the height of the Mexican Revolution.⁴⁰⁰ Place was very important to González Amezcua, and she identified Del Rio and the banks of the Rio Grande as the inspiration for her art.⁴⁰¹ After her parents' deaths, she remained in the family house on Griner Street until her own death in 1975, living with her sister, who also never married.⁴⁰²

The remote and somewhat desolate border town of Del Rio was the “center” for González Amezcua, a border town remote from the cities of power in either the U.S. or Mexico. González Amezcua said in an autobiographical statement that she spent “the gayest days of my life,” in Del Rio and created a world through her imagination “full of joy and full of art.” She wrote poetry as well as drawing and she wrote of Del Rio: “A whole life of happiness I have spent in my Queen City/ Soon her Crown of Gold will be/ City of Roses/City of beauty. In Del Rio I have had all my dreams and inspirations/ Griner Street with shaded trees, singing birds, blooming bushes/ butterflies sweet

³⁹⁹Chelo González Amezcua, “Ode to Merida” in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 3, Folder 11 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁰⁰González Amezcua, “Ode to Merida” in Box 3, Folder 11.

⁴⁰¹Chelo González Amezcua, “Ode to Del Rio” in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 3, Folder 11 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁰²González Amezcua, “Ode to Del Rio” in Box 3, Folder 11.

perfume and those blue skies./ For the beauty of my city full of joy and full of art, for Del Rio, I am always singing,”⁴⁰³ Many of her paintings show a young woman who looks very much like her, a woman she calls Rosie from the City of Roses (Del Rio). She also depicts herself as a Sevillana and as an Egyptian queen. One portrayal is as Lola of the Daggers, an image which derives from a popular song from Andalusia in the early part of the 20th century. It tells the story of a Gypsy betrayed by her lover who revenges herself by stabbing him and feels no remorse.⁴⁰⁴

Border Themes and Resistance in González Amezcua's Art and Poetry

Her artwork drew heavily on Mexican themes, and a distinct sense of *Mexicanidad* pervades her art. Some of her drawings, such as “Smile of a Texas Girl,” depict the fusion of Mexican and U.S. cultures at a time when such motifs were not widespread.⁴⁰⁵ This drawing is unusual because Texas womanhood generally was depicted as white, and in her drawing, the subject is a woman who looks much like González Amezcua herself, clothed in traditional *china poblana* Mexican dress.⁴⁰⁶ Her

⁴⁰³Chelo González Amezcua, Biographical statement in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 1, Folder 1 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁰⁴Newton, “Lush Inner Life.”

⁴⁰⁵Consuelo González Amezcua, “Smile of a Texas Girl,” ink drawing in *Collected Materials* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 3, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁰⁶Photo of Chelo González Amezcua, Scrapbook in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 1, Folder 19 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, 1936).

hair is piled high as González Amezcua wore her own dark hair in later years,⁴⁰⁷ with long, dangling earrings similar to those favored by the artist. A map of Texas is superimposed on the woman's hair with a flower inside the map. She holds in her hand a lone star, symbolizing Texas' nickname, "Lone Star State."⁴⁰⁸

A member of the Mexican American generation—and one of the only prominent visual artists from this period—González Amezcua was a forerunner of the Chicano movement, in which art glorifying Mexico and Mexican Americans became popular. She was one of the first to portray both the Mexican and the American and the borders between them. In her drawing *Mexico Americans* (1969), a hand holds a banner representing North and South America, united by a design radiating from a medallion inscribed "Mexico Americans." She imposed an eagle, the symbol of nationhood for both Mexico and the U.S., on the map and wrote beneath the banner: "*Soy Americana de descendencia Mexicana/ y por doquiera que voy se llevar con dignidad/ el nombre de los Estados Unidos y México.*"⁴⁰⁹ A poem González Amezcua wrote in her seventies declared her to be the "mother of all Chicanos."⁴¹⁰

By delving deeply into Mexican and Spanish art forms and subjects, González Amezcua solidified her own sense of Mexican identity. Her knowledge of Mexican and

⁴⁰⁷Portrait photo of Chelo González Amezcua in Scrapbook in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 1, Folder 20 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, 1967).

⁴⁰⁸González Amezcua, "Smile of a Texas Girl" in Box 3, Folder 3.

⁴⁰⁹González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁴¹⁰Chelo González Amezcua, Untitled poem in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 8 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

Spanish culture (her mother's family were Basques who emigrated from Spain to Mexico)⁴¹¹ also allowed her to see the border and Mexican American culture from a somewhat international perspective. Her poems as well as her art demonstrate the sensibilities of the border, and are set firmly in the world of the borderlands. In the poem "*Lamento Texana*," she writes of her family crossing the border on Mother's Day to visit relatives and old graveyards.⁴¹² One humorous poem, "*Mi Hijo Patalenón*," tells of a mother's worry that her son will not marry the right girl, that is, the girl the mother selected.⁴¹³

Other poems deal with the injustice faced by Mexican Americans in an Anglo world and show her resistance to Anglo domination as well as her knowledge of the life of the borderlands. "*Cantar*" relates the tragedy of Don Jesús, a handsome young man who crossed the Rio Bravo and then lost his ranch to Anglo land thieves who let the land die because they could not keep it fertile.⁴¹⁴ The fact that the land itself dies and that the Anglo owners were not able to make it bear fruit shows the destruction she sees in the Anglo occupation, even in nature. Another poem discusses the plight of a Mexican American youth in Del Rio who is imprisoned unjustly for a murder he did not

⁴¹¹"Exhibit Highlights Texas Art," *San Antonio Light*, May 3, 1968.

⁴¹²Chelo González Amezcua, "*Lamento Texana*" in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 8 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴¹³Chelo González Amezcua, "Mi Hijo Patalenón" in *Cantares y Poemas* (notebook) in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 4 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, 1966).

⁴¹⁴Chelo González Amezcua, "Cantar" in *Poesía y Leyendas* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 1 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

commit.⁴¹⁵ In “*Del Color*,” she says it “matters not if we are black or white as long as God gives us refuge.”⁴¹⁶

Some of her poems praise friends and local leaders. “*Don Emmanuel*” is dedicated to a good man who led an exemplary life.”⁴¹⁷ She wrote poems to old friends about memories of first loves and fancy weddings across the border in Ciudad Acuna.⁴¹⁸ She dedicated several poems to her great niece, Lucy, and to other family members.⁴¹⁹ She also wrote odes to various cities, including two to the White City of Mérida in Yucatán and one to Acapulco when the local Knights of Columbus traveled there for a convention.⁴²⁰ In the poem “Hemisphere Filigree,” she depicts San Antonio with the Hemisphere Tower as the center of a sunflower, describing the petals as representing various aspects of Texas and Mexican culture.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁵Chelo González Amezcua, Untitled 1 in *Printed Poems 1961 to 1973* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 6 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴¹⁶Chelo González Amezcua, “Del Color” in *Handwritten Poems 1967* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 4 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, 1967).

⁴¹⁷Chelo González Amezcua, “Don Emmanuel” in *Handwritten Poems 1960–1964* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 6 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴¹⁸Chelo González Amezcua, Untitled 2 in *Handwritten poems 1961 to 1973* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 7 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴¹⁹González Amexcua, Untitled in Box 2, Folder 7.

⁴²⁰Chelo González Amezcua, “Which Poem?” in *Printed Poems 1961 to 1973* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 6 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴²¹Chelo González Amezcua, “Hemisphere Filigree” in *Handwritten Poems 1960 to 1964* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 7 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, year).

Her poems generally did not follow any particular format but were free form and told a story, often personal. In a book of her poetry that she put together by hand, *Poetas de la Región*,⁴²² there are a large number of five-syllable rhymed lines, a departure from Spanish verse which usually used seven- or eight-syllable lines. She addressed the issue of her lack of formal education as a poet in “*Mis Dos Faroles*,” in which the young narrator tells her mother she wants to write poetry, and despite the challenges of not being formally educated, she vows to write anyway: “I hearby promise that one day my verses will be perfect.”⁴²³

Her drawings also showed glamorous women who often were conflicted in some way and who look like herself as young woman. One drawing depicts a woman whirling and dancing, appearing to move across the page as the colorful filigree art swirls from her Mexican dress to the edge of the paper.⁴²⁴ She dances on a sphere, from which feathers spread out in the colors of the Mexican flag. Blindfolded, as though not wishing to see the world that is gazing upon her, she holds a cornucopia in each upraised hand, from which coins spill.⁴²⁵ Another, “Lady in Lace,” shows a woman in dark Spanish lace surrounded by filigree with Spanish architectural elements nearby. It is reminiscent of a

⁴²²Chelo González Amezcua, *Poetas de la Región* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 1 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴²³Chelo González Amezcua, “*Mis Dos Faroles*” in *Printed Poems 1961 to 1973* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 6 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴²⁴Chelo González Amezcua, Untitled drawing of woman dancing (December 12, 1971) in *Collected Materials 1971 to 1980* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 6 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, 1971).

⁴²⁵González Amezcua, Untitled drawing of woman dancing in Box 2, Folder 6.

photo of a young, slender Chelo dressed as a Sevillana.⁴²⁶ González Amezcua depicted a similar looking woman in many countries and contexts. Often a dancer, the woman might be a Middle Eastern Queen, a Spanish Flamenco artist, or Rosie from the City of Roses (Del Rio) who never married because she could not bear the touch of a man⁴²⁷. When she was young, González Amezcua learned typical Mexican dances and sang and composed Mexican songs.⁴²⁸ She often performed these in later years where she displayed her art and recited her poetry.⁴²⁹ Her art captures the movement of dance within it, as the filigree designs make the eye move and swirl across the page.

González Amezcua was formally educated only through the sixth grade, and her sister recalled that she always had trouble in school.⁴³⁰ Although she dropped out, she developed her art on her own. Her parents discouraged her from pursuing her art and her poetry, saying she didn't have the education or training.⁴³¹

She was a creation and a creator of the borderlands, and she saw herself as both Mexican and Texan. She demonstrated her identification with Mexican arts and crafts in her comparison of her art to the Mexican silver filigree jewelry she loved to wear,⁴³² but

⁴²⁶Chelo González Amezcua, "Lady in Lace," ink drawing on paper in *Scrapbook 1935 to 1964* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 6 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴²⁷González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁴²⁸McNay, "Exhibit Catalogue."

⁴²⁹McNay, "Exhibit Catalogue."

⁴³⁰McNay, "Exhibit Catalogue."

⁴³¹McNay, "Exhibit Catalogue."

her identification as a Texan also came through in the name she gave her style of drawing: “Texas filigree culture.” She used pen and ink, then ball point pens, and still later used color as well as black and white. Her work was done primarily on cardboard. Although she started drawing as a child, her first exhibit was not until she was in her sixties—1968 at the McNay Art Institute in San Antonio.⁴³³

She wrote many autobiographical statements in which she did not so much discuss dates and facts as her own vision and spirituality, often demonstrating a strong sense of place. One such statement began as follows:

It was on the Rio Grande’s banks where I first opened my eyes
In the city of Piedras Negras
In a happy little house
It was in June, the thirteenth day,
When I came to see this world
Papa Jesús and Ma Julia picked out a name for me with love,
Consuelo, Celito or Chelo.”⁴³⁴

Her parents were school teachers, Jesús González Galván and Julia Amezcua de González. The family arrived in Del Rio on Thanksgiving Day in 1913, a year in which violence had increased dramatically in Mexico after the assassination of Mexican President Francisco Madero.⁴³⁵ Her older sister Zara, in a home video made by a great-niece in 1994, remembered the long trek as the extended family traveled on foot

⁴³²“Artist Identifies with Local Culture.”

⁴³³McNay, “Exhibit Catalogue.”

⁴³⁴González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁴³⁵González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box1, Folder 1.

followed by horses, cattle, and goats, sometimes living in covered wagons. “We looked like Hungarians [gypsies],” she said.⁴³⁶

The family lived in rented barrio houses as her father moved from job to job. After he was hired as a bookkeeper in downtown Del Rio, the family moved into a small house in the Anglo section of town.⁴³⁷ When her father died in 1932, González Amezcua’s dreams of going to Mexico to study art were destroyed and she took a job as a *dulcerea* or candy girl at the local department store, Kress.⁴³⁸ Her co-workers told stories about Chelito, whom they remembered fondly for her gaiety and for her generosity. Her friends said González Amezcua would spend her lunch hour and her breaks at work happily singing, drawing, laughing, and telling jokes—often risqué ones.⁴³⁹ One of her poems, “*Dulcerea*,” talks about her work in the store, the refrain running “I am the happy candy girl.” In the poem, she listed the names of the sweets she sold and talked about how cheerily she acted towards the customers and her joy in her work. But the Spanish version of the same poem varied slightly and told a darker story, showing her quiet resistance. She spoke of how her male customers often made passes at

⁴³⁶Zara González Amezcua, Home video in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 3, Folder 9 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴³⁷González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁴³⁸González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁴³⁹Newton, “Lush Inner Life.”

her, and she had to be friendly to them anyway. She remarked that she did not earn enough money to buy the candy she sold.⁴⁴⁰

Art Nouveau

González Amezcua's art work is often described as naïve and untutored and is seen as arising out of her own rich imagination and spiritual visions more than from any outside influence. But a close examination of her work shows that she was strongly influenced by two movements in particular, the Art Nouveau movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the folk art of Mexico, which experienced a revival following the Mexican Revolution and was instrumental in shaping the new Mexican national identity.

Her filigree art is characterized by the curved lines and whiplash curves that were distinctive to Art Nouveau. Art nouveau spread throughout Europe, the U.S., and Latin American from about 1890 to World War I. In many ways, it was a response to and reaction against mass production and industrialization.⁴⁴¹ Artists saw machines as an enemy of art and so turned to nature for inspiration. González Amezcua's designs employed the sinuous flowing curves of Art Nouveau, with varying widths that created a feeling of movement. She also used repeating linear motifs popular in Art Nouveau design. Depictions of nature, one of González Amezcua's favorite themes, were one of

⁴⁴⁰Chelo González Amezcua, "Dulcerea" in *Printed Poems 1961 to 1973* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 6 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁴¹"Art Nouveau," *Non Solo Arte*, accessed March 7, 2013, <http://www.non-solo-arte.com/art-nouveau.html>.

the chief characteristics of Art Nouveau; flowers, grass, and birds were common themes.⁴⁴² The whiplash curves and lines in part were derived from botanical studies and illustrations of deep-sea creatures like those drawn by German biologist Ernst Heinrich Haeckel (1834–1919) in *Kunstformen der Natur* (Art Forms of Nature).⁴⁴³ Art Nouveau influenced many forms of design, including painting, architecture, glass, textiles furniture, silver, china, and jewelry as well as illustration.⁴⁴⁴ Stained glass work also took on new prominence, and the patterns in González Amezcua's art often were reminiscent of those by stained glass artists like Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933), who created metalwork lamps and fantastical bronze and glass objects.⁴⁴⁵

Art Nouveau was influenced by 19th century intellectuals such as French Gothic Revival architect Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879) and British art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900), who said that all arts should be unified and that the decorative arts were not separate from the fine arts.⁴⁴⁶ Art Nouveau creators were influenced by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, trying to bring about a synthesis of art and craft and to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total work of art") which often included

⁴⁴²“Art Nouveau,” *Non Solo Arte*.

⁴⁴³“Art Forms of Nature—The Ernst Haeckel Collection,” accessed on March 13, 2013, <http://www.kuriositas.com/2012/01/art-forms-of-nature-ernst-haeckel.html>.

⁴⁴⁴“The Influence of Art History on Modern Design—Art Nouveau,” *Graphic Design Blog*, March 15, 2013, <http://www.pixel77.com/the-influence-of-art-history-on-modern-design-art-nouveau/>.

⁴⁴⁵“Tiffany: Art Nouveau Artist and Master in Glass,” *Collecting Tiffany Glass*, accessed March 10, 2013, <http://www.antique-marks.com/tiffany.html>.

⁴⁴⁶Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Art Nouveau” in the *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/artn/hd_artn.htm.

a variety of media.⁴⁴⁷ González Amezcua shared this idea of total art and compared her own drawing to Mexican silversmithing.⁴⁴⁸ She tried her hand at various arts including stone carving, drawing, and pottery, even including poetry in her drawings.

Art Nouveau revitalized jewelry making and used nature as its main source of inspiration. The jewelry design prior to the movement had largely been concerned with providing settings for precious jewels. Peacocks were a particularly popular motif of Art Nouveau jewelry and other art forms, as they were in González Amezcua's drawings.⁴⁴⁹ Lalique, in particular, the French designer and jewelry maker, glorified nature in jewelry, including dragonflies, grass, and overlooked animals and natural elements.⁴⁵⁰

The Art Nouveau style reached an international audience through periodicals like *The Savoy*, *La Plume*, *Jugend*, *Dekorative Kunst*, *The Yellow Book*, and *The Studio*. *The Studio* often contained the Symbolist-like linear drawings of Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898).⁴⁵¹ González Amezcua likely encountered art nouveau design in magazines and objects sold at the Kress department store, as well as in buildings in Mexico and in Texas. She probably was influenced by graphic artists such as Alphonse Mucha, Jules Chéret, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, whose posters depicted various types of *belle*

⁴⁴⁷National Gallery of Art, "A New Style for a New Age" in *Anatomy of an Exhibition: Art Nouveau 1890 to 1914*, accessed March 4, 2013, http://www.nga.gov/feature/nouveau/exhibit_intro.shtm.

⁴⁴⁸González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁴⁴⁹"Art Nouveau Jewelry," *Art Deco Nouveau*, accessed March 5, 2013, <http://www.artdeconouveau.co.uk/art-deco-art-nouveau/artnoujewell>.

⁴⁵⁰"Renee Lalique," accessed March 5, 2013, <http://www.djllalique.com/rene-lalique-biography.html>.

⁴⁵¹Metropolitan, "Art Nouveau."

époque women, who, like the *femme nouvelle*, rebelled against the conventional ideals of femininity, domesticity, and subservience and of the demimonde, or prostitute.⁴⁵²

Similar female images often were depicted as fairies or sirens in the jewelry of René Lalique, Georges Fouquet, and Philippe Wolfers.⁴⁵³ These artists are alike in style and the appearance of the stylized women that played such a role in González Amezcua's art. In "*Ritmo del Pavo Real*," a fantastic drawing that depicts a beautiful woman in a long dress, her arms outstretched in dancing pose with peacock feathers on her head is very much in the Art Nouveau style.⁴⁵⁴

On her trips to Mexico City, González Amezcua doubtless encountered the beauty of Art Nouveau architecture. During the early years of the *Porfiriato* (1873–1910), the Mexican upper class became very Francophilic, imitating all things European and especially Parisian.⁴⁵⁵ Mexico City's *Paseo de la Reforma* was inspired by the Champs-Élysées, and the government funded building projects such as the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* and the *Correo Mayor* post office building which followed the Parisian style.⁴⁵⁶ The middle class incorporated European architectural styles into their homes; the mansions of the tree-lined streets of the Juárez and Roma neighborhoods in Mexico

⁴⁵²Metropolitan, "Art Nouveau."

⁴⁵³Metropolitan, "Art Nouveau."

⁴⁵⁴Chelo González Amezcua, "Ritmo del Pavo Real" (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1968).

⁴⁵⁵"Las Características del Art Nouveau," *Exposiciones del Museo Franz Mayer Art Nouveau en México*, accessed March 17, 2013, <http://ciepfa.posgrado.unam.mx/notiarq/archivoNotiARQ/artNouveau.html>.

⁴⁵⁶"Las Características," *Franz Mayer Museo*.

City were the best examples of this sort of opulence. New upper and middle class *colonias* copied Art Nouveau designs in their façades, with undulating borders and stylized plant forms. European-trained architects like Admo Boari designed buildings such as Mexico's National Theater, which contained a glass curtain built by Tiffany in New York and sculptures on the outside dome made by Géza Maróti in Budapest.⁴⁵⁷ The theater's four Pegasus sculptures were created by the Catalán sculptor Agustín Querol. The building was finally completed by Federico Mariscal in 1934.⁴⁵⁸ The interior of the Gran Hotel de México, created by Daniel Garza y Gonzalo Garita, contained numerous examples of Art Nouveau, such as the ceiling of its main hall and a skylight designed by Jacques Gruber, a member of the *École de Nancy* (1908).⁴⁵⁹

Folk Art Influence

González Amezcua worked in ball point pen in four main colors: red, blue, and black and green on paper and on cardboard. She was fascinated with dreams and mysticism and was particularly drawn to ancient cultures, including to the pre-Columbian world of Mexico and to the kings and queens of Spain, the Middle East, and Morocco.

One of her greatest interests was architecture, in particular Moorish architecture and Persian architectural details. She incorporated poetry into her drawings and wrote

⁴⁵⁷Atilla Bruner, "Route européenne de l'Art nouveau" (paper presented at the International Congress, Barcelona, Spain, June 15, 2012), accessed March 15, 2013, <http://artnouveau.eu/fr/index.php>.

⁴⁵⁸Bruner, "Route européenne."

⁴⁵⁹Bruner, "Route européenne."

personal thoughts or explanations on the back of the paper or cardboard. Although examples of the practice of writing art on works in Cubism in the 1910s and in Surrealism and Art Brut exist, it seems more likely she was influenced by the *ex-voto* paintings she saw when traveling in Mexico and in South Texas.

Ex-voto is derived from the Latin, meaning promise or vow.⁴⁶⁰ *Ex-voto* paintings often are placed in a church or shrine as thanks to God or a saint for a promise fulfilled. Often the painting is done in a childlike way, on tin or paper, showing a dramatic event—a car wreck, a hurricane, an operation—and gives thanks for the artist being saved. Like González Amezcua's work, *ex-votos* are public as well as personal statements of faith. Also like González Amezcua's art, they include text to explicate the message of the drawing; often the text is placed in script in a corner or small portion of the painting.

Votive offerings date back as far as the 5th century B.C. and were used as gifts given to Apollo at Delphi.⁴⁶¹ The current form of *ex-votos* began being produced in Italy in the 15th century, when artists were commissioned to create them. Their popularity spread throughout Europe and Latin America.⁴⁶² In one of the first painted *ex-votos* in Mexico, Hernan Cortés, the conquistador who defeated the Aztecs, had an *ex-voto* made

⁴⁶⁰“Ex-Voto Definitions,” *New Mexico State Retablo Collections*, accessed April 4, 2013, <http://artdepartment.nmsu.edu/faculty/zarursite/retablo/collection.html>.

⁴⁶¹Richard Ferguson, “Ex-votos: Folk Art and Expressions of Faith in Mexico,” *Mex-Connect*, accessed March 15, 2013, <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/969-exvotos-folk-art-and-expressions-of-faith-in-mexico>.

⁴⁶²Ferguson, “Ex-votos”

of gold and emeralds to give thanks for surviving a scorpion's bite.⁴⁶³ Some of González Amezcua's work very directly resemble *ex-votos* and are in obvious imitation, such as her "Parable of the Seed," which depicts a barren hillside and a flourishing tree, along with a parable she wrote about growth and God's love, surrounded by her filigree design. Her "Eyes of Saint Lucy," which portrays Lucy, the martyred saint whose eyes were gouged out, holding her eyes in her hands is very similar to an *ex-voto*, not just in subject matter but in style.⁴⁶⁴ González Amezcua tells her story in script on the side, also in *ex-voto* style.

"La Capa del Santo" is her most direct nod to Mexican folk art, including her prayer to a saint accompanied by a drawing of *milagros*⁴⁶⁵ pinned on the cape of an unidentified saint beside which she wrote: "The cape of my saint, full of Milagros and a cross I pinned."⁴⁶⁶

Two-Sided Format

Using unusual materials like cardboard to combine image and text were not at all common in post-Renaissance secular Western art, and González Amezcua's work subverted the centrality of the image which has governed Western art in other ways as

⁴⁶³Ferguson, "Ex-votos."

⁴⁶⁴Consuelo González Amezcua, "Ojitos de Santa Lucía/Eyes of Saint Lucy" (ink on paper) in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Collection, Box 8, Folder (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1968).

⁴⁶⁵Consuelo González Amezcua, "*La Capa del Santo*" in *Scrapbook 1967* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 1, Folder 20 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, 1967).

⁴⁶⁶González Amezcua, "La Capa del Santo" in Box 1, Folder 20.

well. For one thing, the double-sided format she used kept her work from being exhibited in a conventional way.⁴⁶⁷ Some critics have attributed this to her lack of formal art education, but it is more likely that she was copying techniques from pre-Columbian art and Mexican folk art. The idea of the front not being the only important part of the work was an important one in Meso-American art.⁴⁶⁸ The symbolism in Meso-American religious art required carving the sections of the stones that remained hidden as well as those that were visible to the viewer. The god's head and back had to be carved as well as the front since the god was a holy animate object.⁴⁶⁹ Also, the front and back are commonly used in contemporary Mexican folk art of the period, such as in depictions of *santos* and in *retablos*. Often a description of the saint, a date, and other information can be found on the back of both Mexican and New Mexican *retablos*, the devotional folk art often found near altars in churches. González Amezcua did not know that poems and images were not supposed to be included in the same work of art, said art historian Quirarte. She simply included a poem in a drawing if she thought it was necessary for that work of art.⁴⁷⁰

Quirarte argued that González Amezcua's "*El Mosaico de las Aves*" shows how the artist can both draw and depart from conventions of Western and pre-Columbian art.

⁴⁶⁷Jacinto Quirarte, "Image and Text in the Work of Consuelo González Amézcu," *Research Center for the Arts Review* 5 (January 1982): 3.

⁴⁶⁸Quirarte, "Image and Text," 4.

⁴⁶⁹González Amezcua, "Ojitos de Santa Lucía."

⁴⁷⁰Jacinto Quirarte and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, *Mystical Elements/Lyrical Imagery: Consuelo González Amezcua, 1903–1975* (Del Rio, TX: Del Rio Council for the Arts, 1991): 5.

Quirarte said that this double-sided ballpoint pen drawing on cardboard that includes a poem shares similarities with pre-Columbian art in the double-sided format but differs in that it does not have a similar symbolic system. Quirarte's essay is one of the few that has been written on women artists of the Mexican American generation.⁴⁷¹

Birds

González Amezcua used several motifs of Mexican folk art in her work, particularly those found in nature, such as birds and flowers. One of the most obvious facts about Mexican folk art is the essential role nature plays in the art. Birds, trees, cactus, flowers, and even grasses create continuity from pre-Hispanic art to the present day.⁴⁷² During the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican artists and academics such as Diego Rivera, Adolfo Best Maugart, and Frida Kahlo along with expatriates like Frances Toor and William Spratling worked to revitalize Mexican folk art. For artists like Rivera and Kahlo, folk art, with its indigenous roots, was a key part of Mexican identity. It was an expression of *La Raza Cósmica*, an idealized concept of *mestizaje* or racial mixing put forth by José Vasconcelos, the Mexican philosopher and secretary of education who saw this "fifth race" of mixed Spanish and Indians as leading the Americas.⁴⁷³ Kahlo idealized the indigenous roots of Mexico and the concept of *mestizaje*. She wore the

⁴⁷¹Quirarte and Hinojosa-Smith, *Mystical Elements*.

⁴⁷²Maya Schacter, "Birds in Mexican Folk Art," *Audubon Mexico*, accessed on April 5, 2013, <http://www.audubonmex.org/lectures/natureinart.htm>.

⁴⁷³José Vasconcelos, "La Raza Cósmica," accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.filosofia.org/aut/001/razacos.htm>.

embroidered traditional textile skirts and blouses of indigenous Mexican groups, particularly that of the Tepehuana, known for their strong women.⁴⁷⁴ *Artesanía*, folk crafts, were themselves seen as a way of promoting Mexican national identity in the post-revolutionary period. Folk art had significant influences on other artists of this period as well, such as María Izquierdo, born a year before González Amezcuea, and like González Amezcuea, Izquierdo was known for her portraits of women and of Mexican popular traditions such as the circus. Also like González Amezcuea, Izquierdo eschewed the overtly political that was popular among her contemporaries at the *Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes*, instead painting personal paintings rooted in humble Mexican traditions like the circus, Catholic saints and the Day of the Dead. Like Kahlo, she often painted herself in traditional indigenous Mexican clothing.⁴⁷⁵ Roberto Montenegro, a muralist, also promoted folk art during the 1920s and 1930s. For the centennial of the Mexican War of Independence in 1921, he organized a folk art exhibit along with Gerardo Murillo—the volcanologist and radical who painted Mexican landscapes and named himself after the Aztec word for water, calling himself Dr. Atl—and Jorge Enciso, who worked to resurrect the design motifs of ancient Mexico.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁴Public Broadcasting Service, “The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo,” accessed March 14, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/>.

⁴⁷⁵Rita Pomade, “María Izquierdo – Monumento Artístico de la Nación,” *Mexconnect*, accessed March 2, 2013, <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1075-maria-izquierdo-monumento-artistico-de-la-naci%C3%B3n>.

⁴⁷⁶Esperanza Balderas, *Roberto Montenegro: La Sensualidad Renovada* (Mexico City, Mexico: Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, 2001), 24.

One of the Mexican folk art themes González Amezcua was most fond of was birds. Birds are common in Mexican folk art such as on the *amate* bark paintings popular among Nahuatl and other indigenous groups in the state of Hidalgo. In the bark paintings, bright parrots are often depicted, as they are in the Mexican pottery birds that imitate pre-Hispanic art, a specialty in Jalisco. Birds are commonly woven into the *huipiles* of indigenous women's garments. They also are popular in the Mexican tree of life sculptures created in Morelos state. And the hand-carved *alebrijes* of Oaxaca often depict fanciful colorful birds.

González Amezcua frequently depicted birds and birds transforming themselves into hands and hands into birds. In "Birds of Paradise," she focused on birds of all sizes and types—cardinals, bluejays, blackbirds, swans, and peacocks, surrounded by flowers and greenery. Even the frame is filled with floral patterns.⁴⁷⁷ In "*La Floresta*," she painted birds and flowers in a painted, scalloped frame.⁴⁷⁸ "*Primavera*" includes filigree drawings on capitals and columns as well as on the wings of birds.⁴⁷⁹ "*El Mosaico de las*

⁴⁷⁷Chelo González Amezcua, "Birds of Paradise" in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 8, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁷⁸Chelo González Amezcua, "La Floresta" in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 8, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁷⁹Chelo González Amezcua, "Primavera" in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 8, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

Aves” included a variety of peacocks, perching and flying, along with doves.⁴⁸⁰ In “The Garden of Fayad Said,”⁴⁸¹ she portrayed several birds and depicted feathered wings springing from the upper part of a woman’s head, to show flying thoughts. “In My Love Birds, El Rio Castilian,” she portrayed doves inside a frame, the shape of which echoes the wings of the birds.⁴⁸²

Birds also were often a part of her depiction of both mythical and historical figures.⁴⁸³ In “*Las Ninfas de la Silva*,” winged figures are surrounded by numerous flowers and trees.⁴⁸⁴ Peacocks were one of her favorite birds, and rulers, particularly those of the near East, often were accompanied by peacocks in her work. In “Winged Muses,” she depicted a number of muses with wings among palaces in a star-studded night sky. A poem on the back in English reads:

Under the tree of winged muses
I was resting one day
Flapping their wings they came to me
With a sweet tone they wanted me to hear

⁴⁸⁰Chelo González Amezcua, “El Mosaico de las Aves” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 7, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁸¹Chelo González Amezcua, “The Garden of Fayad Said” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 7, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁸²Chelo González Amezcua, “El Río Castillian” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 7, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁸³Chelo González Amezcua, “My Love Birds, El Rio Castillian” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 7, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁴⁸⁴Chelo González Amezcua, “*Las Ninfas de la Silva*” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 8, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

Rejoicing full of riches they all surrounded me
Beautiful sight-hour of delight. (I was in ecstasy).⁴⁸⁵

She signed the poem and added that she could not dispel the beautiful faces,
which she then drew with black ink on a sheet of cardboard.

In a similar work entitled “Winged Muse/*Musa Alada*,” she depicted the head of a beautiful muse in profile framed by wings of birds. The design is surrounded by a black field filled with twinkling stars.⁴⁸⁶ She included a lengthy poem in Spanish on the back of the drawing and a shorter one in English. “Through the moonlight she comes, flapping her wings on my brain. My thought alerts, to find out her trip was not in vain.”⁴⁸⁷ In “Prophecy,” a winged angel unrolls a scroll held up by doves and surrounded by trees and fantastical architecture with elaborately carved columns.⁴⁸⁸

Gardens

Gardens also played an important role in her art—elaborate Islamic and Andalusian gardens as well as more humble ones like those at her own house on Griner Street. On the back of one of her drawings, she wrote, “King Lirartamo, King of Arts

⁴⁸⁵Chelo González Amezcua, “Winged Muses” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 7, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1960).

⁴⁸⁶Chelo González Amezcua, “Winged Muse/*Musa Alada*” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 8, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1970).

⁴⁸⁷Chelo González Amezcua, “Winged Muse/*Musa Alada*” (pen and pencil drawing on paper) in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 7, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1970).

⁴⁸⁸González Amezcua, “Winged Muse/ *Musa Alada*” drawing.

born in the garden of my imagination.”⁴⁸⁹ She often used the metaphor of imagination as a garden: “I was always a dreamer, and I am still painting my dream visions,” González Amezcua said.⁴⁹⁰

Flowers and gardens were not only an important feature of traditional Spanish architecture. Flowers also were central in Mayan and Aztec tradition. In the 15th century, wars in which the Aztecs took prisoners for sacrifice were called the Flower Wars.⁴⁹¹ For ancient Aztec poets, the meaning of life was expressed in the phrase, “*In Xochitl, in Cuicatl*” meaning “The flower, the song.” This is a Nahuatl metaphor signifying the art of poetry, which Aztecs called “The one true thing on earth.”⁴⁹² The Aztecs also created garlands, flower arrangements, paper flowers and flower adornments of many types.⁴⁹³

Offerings of flowers also were an important part of worship and were placed on figures of the gods and played a central role in ceremonies. During the feast of Tlaxochimoco, the common people gave flowers to one another and the concubines of great nobles, paraded wearing garlands.⁴⁹⁴ The 16th century Dominican priest Diego

⁴⁸⁹Chelo González Amezcua, “King Liratamo” from January 31, 1968, in *Scrapbook* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 1, Folder 20 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, 1968).

⁴⁹⁰González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁴⁹¹“Mexico Flowers and Flower Art,” *Mexconnect*, accessed April 2, 2013, <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/2633-mexico-flowers-and-flower-art>.

⁴⁹²“Mexico Flowers and Flower Art,” *Mexconnect*.

⁴⁹³“Mexico Flowers and Flower Art,” *Mexconnect*.

⁴⁹⁴“Mexico Flowers and Flower Art,” *Mexconnect*.

Duran wrote that the Aztec love for flowers was so great that that nothing gave the people more happiness than simply smelling any type of flower.⁴⁹⁵

The feast of Xochiquetzal (meaning “Flowery Plumage”) was called “Farewell to the Flowers” because of its timing as the growing season ended. Temples, houses, and streets were decorated with flowers. Xochipilli, the “Flower Prince,” was associated with flowers, dancing, and feasting, as was Macuilxochitl “5 flower.”⁴⁹⁶ The ancient Aztecs also were known for the use of flower themes in their decorative arts from ceramics to headdresses to thrones.⁴⁹⁷

The Mexican art of paper flowers also has been popular since pre-Hispanic times. The paper brought by the Spaniards became widely used, and in the 16th century the first paper mill in America was built in *Culhuacán*, a small town near Mexico City.⁴⁹⁸ Thin tissue paper called *papel de China* was imported with the Nao of China and was used for making decorations, including paper flowers.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁵“Mexico Flowers and Flower Art,” *Mexconnect*.

⁴⁹⁶“Mexico Flowers and Flower Art,” *Mexconnect*.

⁴⁹⁷“Mexican Paper Flowers,” *Mexican Folk Art Guide*, accessed April 8, 2013, <http://www.mexican-folk-art-guide.com/mexican-paper-flowers.html>.

⁴⁹⁸“Mexican Paper Flowers,” *Mexican Folk Art Guide*.

⁴⁹⁹“Mexican Paper Flowers,” *Mexican Folk Art Guide*.

Much Mexican pottery, for example, the Tonalá pottery of Guadalajara, is decorated with flower and bird motifs. The *flor de Tonalá* (Tonalá flower) first appeared in pottery design in the early 1900s.⁵⁰⁰

Much of the ancient symbolism and flower crafts have continued in Mexico through to the present day. Marigolds still play a major role in Day of the Dead celebrations⁵⁰¹ and *alhombbras*, carpets made of sawdust, flowers, and even feathers often are used to cover streets on Easter and other days of celebration.⁵⁰² Diego Rivera called upon this tradition in his frequent use of Calla lilies in his paintings.⁵⁰³

González Amezcua saw her art as akin to Mexican silver-smithing, talking often of her filigree art and comparing it to the Mexican silver jewelry she liked to wear. There is a long tradition of metalworking in Mexico, and workmanship in silver, gold and copper were highly advanced when the Spanish arrived. The work focused largely on jewelry and ornamentation. The Spanish introduced new techniques like filigree, in which miniscule metal threads were pulled together to make precious jewelry. During the colonial period, native peoples were forbidden from working precious metals. The 20th century began to see the revival of ancient designs, with Taxco becoming the center for silver work and handmade silver jewelry one of Mexico's major exports. González

⁵⁰⁰“Uncovering Tonalá’s History at the National Ceramic Museum,” *Mexconnect*, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1293-uncovering-tonala-s-history-at-the-national-ceramic-museum>.

⁵⁰¹“Mexico Flowers and Flower Art,” *Mexconnect*.

⁵⁰²“Mexico Flowers and Flower Art,” *Mexconnect*.

⁵⁰³“Mexico Flowers and Flower Art,” *Mexconnect*.

Amezcuca may well have visited the silver center of Taxco, a major tourist hub in the 1920s and 1930s, where American expatriate William Spratling helped revive the art of Mexican silverwork.⁵⁰⁴ The U.S. Ambassador to Mexico at the time, Dwight Morrow, suggested to Spratling in 1931 that Taxco, which had been the site of silver mines for centuries, also should become also a place where silver objects were created. Spratling hired a goldsmith from the nearby town of Iguala, who moved to Taxco and created silver jewelry patterned on Spratling's design. Other craftsmen joined him and began to produce his designs, many of which were based on pre-Columbian motifs. Spratling created an apprentice system and pioneered a jewelry-making process in which many miniscule metal threads were pulled together to make precious jewelry.⁵⁰⁵

Spratling's use of pre-Columbian aesthetics is comparable to the use of similar themes in Rivera and Kahlo's art, and though he was American, his work became part of the Mexican nationalist movement and gave Mexican artisans the opportunity to create designs outside of mainstream European motifs, instead employing an aesthetic vocabulary based on pre-Columbian art. Often the silver jewelry was bought by American tourists as symbols of primitive exoticism resembling as they did the reliefs from the Temple of Quetzlacoatl at Xochicalco or the clay stamps that Spratling admired.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰⁴“Spratling Silver,” accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.spratlingsilver.com/>.

⁵⁰⁵“Spratling Silver.”

⁵⁰⁶“Spratling Silver.”

González Amezcua was a stone carver for years before age forced her to give up the strenuous activity for her drawings.⁵⁰⁷ González Amezcua's stone carving also sprang out of a long Mexican tradition. Stone sculpture, such as idols, figurative art, and architectural elements, were all important in Meso-American culture. Large boulders sculpted to look like living figures, called zoomorphs, were important in pre-Columbian cultures. Altars were carved out of stone, and figures such as idols were carved in the round, with humans and deities in human form meant to be seen from every side as well as human heads on a much larger-than-life scale. The Aztec, Maya, and Olmec carved ordinary volcanic rock as well as semi-precious stone like jade animals and plants, lidded boxes, sacrificial vessels, and musical instruments also were carved in stone with simple hard wood tools, fiber cords and water and sand.⁵⁰⁸

Mudéjar Influence

As well as Mexican folk art, González Amezcua was influenced by the Moorish gardens of Southern Spain and the Islamic architecture that surrounded them. She displayed a fascination with the revival of all things Moorish that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th century in the U.S. and Europe and Mexico. This accompanied her interest in Spanish history, which she may have absorbed from her parents. One of her

⁵⁰⁷Dianne Murray, "Pecos River Stone Carver," *San Angelo Standard Times*, November 6, 1992.

⁵⁰⁸Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Aztec Stone Carving," accessed May 1, 2013, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/azss/hd_azss.htm.

grandparents was an immigrant from the Basque region of Spain.⁵⁰⁹ Much of her work draws on the history of Spain, particularly its Moorish and Middle Eastern heritage, combined with a dream world where history and myth overlap. This interest was displayed in drawings like that of “Aben-amar, the Christian,” in which she illustrated the story of a Moor in Spain whose mother was Christian and father Muslim. The biblical-looking figure in desert robes is surrounded by the domes of mosques and elaborate Moorish tile work.⁵¹⁰

The Moorish revival that was so popular during González Amezcua’s early life doubtless fed her interest in the romance of the Moors. Córdoba was featured over and over in the magazines of the day the history, and the culture of Spain was gaining new popularity among both European and American scholars.⁵¹¹ Arabic studies was developed as a discipline, while the romantic interest in Moorish Spain was well-established in the 19th century.⁵¹² Flamenco dancing was gaining attention, and touring flamenco groups traveled the U.S. and Mexico. In Mexico, which had been influenced by *Mudéjar* architecture since colonial times, modernist architects like Luis Barragan

⁵⁰⁹Chelo González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁵¹⁰Chelo González Amezcua, “Aben-Amar, the Christian” (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1966), accessed November 1, 2012, <http://www.americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=32498>.

⁵¹¹“Moorish Revival in Europe,” accessed May 1, 2013, <http://hotsdil.blogspot.com/2011/04/moorish-revival-in-europe.html>.

⁵¹²“Moorish Revival in Europe.”

and Juan O’Gorman began appropriating *Mudéjar* design, including the use of water, thick walls, and Persian decorative motifs.⁵¹³

In Catalonia, Antoni Gaudí’s deep interest in *Mudéjar* heritage governed the design of his early works, such as Casa Vicens and Astorga Palace.⁵¹⁴ In Andalusia, the Neo-*Mudéjar* style became popular after the Ibero-American Exposition of 1929, with creations such as the Plaza de España of Seville and the Gran Teatro Falla in Cádiz.⁵¹⁵ In Madrid, the Neo-*Mudéjar* was a prominent style for housing and public buildings at the beginning of the 20th century.⁵¹⁶ The style even traveled to Imperial Russia, where the Morozov House in Moscow was encrusted with shells in an imitation of the Portuguese palace in Sintra. In Bosnia, the Austrian government created a range of Neo-Moorish structures.⁵¹⁷

In the U.S., Washington Irving’s travel book *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832) first piqued Americans’ imagination with the romance of Andalusia.⁵¹⁸ One of the first neo-Moorish structures constructed in the U.S was Iranistan, a mansion built by P.T. Barnum

⁵¹³“Luis Barragan Biography,” accessed May 1, 2013, Architect/Architecture.sk <http://architect.architecture.sk/>.

⁵¹⁴“Moorish Revival Architecture—Antoni Gaudí,” *Essential Architecture*, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.essential-architecture.com/STYLE/STY-MoorishRevival.htm>.

⁵¹⁵“Moorish Revival in Europe.”

⁵¹⁶“Moorish Revival in Europe.”

⁵¹⁷“Moorish Revival in Europe.”

⁵¹⁸“Development of Moorish Revival in the U.S.,” accessed May 1, 2013, <http://hotsdil.blogspot.com/2011/04/moorish-revival-in-europe.html>.

in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1848.⁵¹⁹ By the 1860s, the style had spread across America. The painter Frederic Edwin Church constructed Olana as his residence overlooking the Hudson River. After the Civil War, Moorish or Turkish smoking rooms became popular, and there were Moorish details in the interiors of the Henry Osborne Havemeyer home on Fifth Avenue, designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany.⁵²⁰ The style even spread to South Dakota, where, in 1937, the Corn Palace was built to include minarets and Moorish domes made out of corncobs in different colors.⁵²¹ The 1891 Tampa Bay Hotel, whose minarets and Moorish domes are now the pride of the University of Tampa, was a particularly extravagant example of the style. Other schools with Moorish Revival buildings include Yeshiva University in New York City.⁵²²

In her drawing “The Garden of Fayad,” González Amezcua combined her love of gardens, birds, and Moorish history with filigree designs over arcades, towers and passageways, set among palm trees red flowers and birds.⁵²³ Many of her drawings of the Middle East included peacocks, in line with Art Nouveau and Moorish and Mexican folk art traditions. In “Solomon,” she wrote about Queen Atlaia from a country in southern Arabia and included characters in Arabic near the title. Trees, filigree, names, shapes, and a miniature portrait of King Solomon in profile are included in the

⁵¹⁹“Moorish Revival in the U.S.”

⁵²⁰“Moorish Revival in the U.S.”

⁵²¹“Moorish Revival in the U.S.”

⁵²²“Moorish Revival in the U.S.”

⁵²³Consuelo González Amezcua, “Garden of Fayad” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 7, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1974).

artwork.⁵²⁴ In “*Ritmo del Pavo Real*,” she depicted a beautiful woman in a long dress, her arms outstretched in dancing pose with peacock feathers on her head. She signed her name on the lower left side and on the reverse she drew a woman with a small peacock. She wrote on the woman’s torso a poem describing the gait of the peacock: “It creates visions in my mind, beauty without equal dressed in plumage. Its gentle cadence knows no end. It inspires me. It creates visions in my mind, beauty without equal dressed in plumage, I see another dance.”⁵²⁵

In “Solomon,” she depicts a corner of a king’s palace with large trees, flowers, shrubs, and a peacock beneath an arcade, along with a circular tower with an arched entrance. A night sky is seen in the far distance. The rest of the drawing is made of curvilinear forms interspersed with very intricate lacy patterns.⁵²⁶ She also painted actual historical figures like Jehoram, King of Judea; Montezuma; and Nefertiti. In “La Ventana del Rey Johoram,” a woman looks out of a large bell-shaped tower window with a date tree and a smaller tree on which is written in English and Spanish: “In the window of King Jehoram, a beautiful jewel was hidden. I couldn’t discern why the

⁵²⁴Consuelo González Amezcua, “Solomon” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 8, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1974).

⁵²⁵González Amezcua, “Ritmo del Pavo Real.”

⁵²⁶Chelo González Amezcua, “Solomon” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 1965).

mystery of this jewel that was reassured giving light and shining birth. King Jehoram made Athaliaha queen and she was the meanest woman you ever knew.”⁵²⁷

In “Prince Abuzabi,” she depicted an urban arcade, balconies, and towers with numerous palm trees. She wrote of the prince: “He united the people and had a special relationship with flowers. Even though he was an ugly prince. But when he was in his garden, beauty shown on his face.”⁵²⁸

Self-taught, Naïve, and Spiritual

González Amezcua had much in common with the Mexican folk artists whose motifs she used. Like them, she lacked formal training, but had vision and talent. Although González Amezcua initially regretted not going to art school, she ended up feeling her lack of training was an advantage and allowed her to more directly express the divine through her art. She wrote: “The School or arts/I couldn’t afford and for that I thank the lord/For what He has given me is the truth of His great love/For Him I worked and carved a stone and make a drawing and sing a song.”⁵²⁹

Though her art often seemed propelled by flights of imagination and fantasy, it was firmly rooted on the Texas-Mexican border. Her love of place came across strongly.

⁵²⁷Chelo González Amezcua, “La Ventana del Rey Jehoram” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 8, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁵²⁸Chelo González Amezcua, “Prince Aubuzabi” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 7, Folder 1 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁵²⁹Chelo González Amezcua, “Song of the Arts” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 8, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

She referred to the Pecos River stone she carved as “*Mis Piedras Conchas*,” the shell stone of the Pecos River. She wrote: “My Piedra Concha you are not rude, you are semisoft./I’ll caress you with my chisel to transform you into a jewel box and a fine lace I am carving./Wherever you’ll be placed, I promise you’ll be shining.”⁵³⁰

She attributed her gifts to God and often expressed her gratitude to the Lord in her letters and her autobiographical statements:

Thanks to you my God eternal
for you let me carve these rocks.
Thanks for my filigree art
For all the figures you have given me
For the pleasure enjoying the transformation
Thanks for my rhymes and lyrics,
for the poetry, my treasure and while I live
I’ll be singing to thee, my eternal God
for what you have given me is that beauty of your love
for I was once a hard stone
that your great love has transformed.⁵³¹

This naïve spirit was praised by newspapers and reviewers. The Monterrey newspaper *El Norte* wrote that her poetry “reflects another vision of reality learned in childhood.”⁵³² The *Diario de Juárez* said that she captured the art of her tranquil community and that the artist’s house and of her love of animals and plants “all provided inspiration for this singular artist.”⁵³³

⁵³⁰Chelo González Amezcua, “Mis Piedras Conchas,” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Photograph Collection, Box 8, Folder 2 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁵³¹Chelo González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁵³²“Amezcua,” *El Norte*, April 3, 1965.

⁵³³“Chelo González Amezcua,” *Diario de Juárez*, June 18, 1973.

She believed the ball point pen had numerous advantages. It required no special technique, and she could draw long continuous lines without having to constantly use an inkwell. She did not do any special research or spend time on sketches, instead focusing on the finished projects, planning ahead in her mind rather than on paper. She would then outline the major forms and figures and go back and fill in the details.⁵³⁴

She worked an average of 18 days on each drawing, spending about three to five hours a day during late afternoons and evenings. Even if it was not the main theme of the picture, she would surround the subject with gardens of flowers and birds and elaborate filigree designs intertwined with birds and flowers.⁵³⁵

“She expressed everything she felt and believed to be true in her art and poetry,” one newspaper reporter wrote. She expressed her innermost feelings in her work. She never looked back. She was open and unhampered by the proper way of doing things in the professional art world. Because she was true to herself and her work, she was an extraordinary and unique poet and artist.⁵³⁶

Matagorda County Museum Director Anne W. Goda said, “Words cannot describe Chelo’s artwork. It must be seen to be understood and appreciated. Each piece

⁵³⁴González Amezcua, Biographical statement in Box 1, Folder 1.

⁵³⁵“Amezcua,” *El Norte*.

⁵³⁶“The Poetic Creations of Chelo Amezcua,” *Daily Tribune*, February 14, 1993.

is visually unique, and one can spend hours studying the exacting details of her filigree art.⁵³⁷

Her simple philosophy of loving kindness showed in her poem “Road of Life,” in which she wrote in English and Spanish. “Road of my life, I am going to transform you. I’ll plant the seeds of love, songs, and happiness. I am convinced our lord always gives a prize and a gift to those who model their lives on understanding and happiness.”⁵³⁸

Sometimes she depicted herself in this mode of simple inspiration. For example, in “*La Niña Inspirada*” she shows the figure of a girl with outstretched arms on a donkey. The donkey is in the midst of a grove of trees, and a dove is perched on its back. Abandoned houses stand in the distance. An accompanying poem says the artist was eight when she saw the donkey and the dove.⁵³⁹

Literary scholar Rolando Hinojosa-Smith wrote that González Amezcua created her own world: “Chelo created a world full of magic mysticism and wonderment in her drawings as well as her poetry and stone carving. Her poetry readings, dancing, and

⁵³⁷Anne Goda, “Matagorda County Musings”, vol. VI (Bay City, TX: Matagorda County Museum Association) in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Collection, Box 7, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁵³⁸Chelo González Amezcua, “Road of Life” in *Handwritten Poems 1960 to 1964* in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 7 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁵³⁹Chelo González Amezcua, “La Niña Inspirada” in the Manuel Chaca Ramírez Collection, Box 8, Folder 3 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

singing added more dimensions to that world. She loved all these things and architecture and through them she was able to express her beautiful and generous spirit.⁵⁴⁰

González Amezcua was a part of the Mexican American generation, but her art became famous in part due to the new attention focused on Mexican American cultural creation during the Chicano period. During the 1960s, when she was in her 60s, she lost her job at Kress and needed money, so asked the owners of a local photo studio if she could put her art up for sale. In 1967, an art teacher from San Antonio, Amy Freeman Lee visited Del Rio to give a lecture and saw one of her drawings.⁵⁴¹

Freeman Lee asked to see more art works, and when she returned to San Antonio, she worked with the director of the McNay Institute of Art to organize an exhibit of González Amezcua's work. In February and March of 1968 the exhibit came to fruition, and 42 of her drawings were displayed. González Amezcua then began to exhibit throughout Texas, Mexico, and other parts of the U.S. One of her drawings was selected as the cover piece for Jacinto Quirarte's 1973 book *Mexican American Artists*.⁵⁴² "The visual impact attracted me like a magnet, and as I approached the drawing, I found it even more extraordinary than I had first imagined. It looked as

⁵⁴⁰Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, "Poems and Songs" in the Chelo González Amezcua Papers, Box 2, Folder 7 (Austin, TX: Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

⁵⁴¹Goda, "Matagorda County Musings."

⁵⁴²Goda, "Matagorda County Musings."

though some ancient Persian had spun the design out of spider webs and thistle,”
Freeman Lee said.⁵⁴³

Though González Amezcua had won prizes for her poems, she did not receive recognition for her drawings until the solo exhibition at the McNay. She later exhibited her work in Monterrey, Mexico (1968); the Hemisfair, San Antonio (1968); Springfield, Massachusetts (1969); the Wilson Memorial Art Center in Beaumont, Texas (1970); and Trinity University, San Antonio (1973). She died in 1975, but her work continues to be exhibited and sold, most notably at the Randall Morris Gallery in New York, which specializes in Outsider Art. Since her death, González Amezcua’s art has been shown at the Bronx Museum of Art, New York (1988); in several gallery exhibitions in New York City (1991); and at the McNay Art Museum, San Antonio (1991). In 1991, the Del Rio Council for the Arts organized an exhibition of her work that traveled to various Texas museums in 1992 and 1993. Her work also is displayed at the Whitehead Memorial Museum in Del Rio and is held in many private collections.

González Amezcua began her life as a Mexican immigrant child in the U.S. She first looked to Mexico to gain her artistic identity, applying for and earning a scholarship at the country’s most prestigious art academy. Limited by class, ethnicity, and gender, she spent most of her life selling candy at Kress department store, and drawing and writing in her off hours on inexpensive materials. She developed a new identity, part Texan, part Mexican, part denizen of the borderlands, and she expressed this identity through writing and art. Her art and her poetry showed resistance against the dominant

⁵⁴³Goda, “Matagorda County Musings.”

Anglo culture, both in its content and by its *Mexicanidad*. She was one of the few female visual artists of the Mexican American generation, but it took the Chicano generation to bring her art to the forefront. She was both Mexican and American, as was her art, and she was able to create an art that brought both worlds together in the complexities of the borderlands.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The women I have researched in this dissertation helped create 20th century Mexican American society. They were daring boundary breakers who by transgressing the rules of Mexican-and sometimes Anglo society- were at the forefront of creating a hybrid identity for Mexican Americans.

As cultural creators, they moved beyond traditional modes of expression, exploring new frontiers in their lives as well as their art. As they struggled to discover and develop their own identity, they created an art and literature of the borderlands. Although they were each strong individuals, different from one another in personality and in their artistic expression, they shared many important qualities-independence, courage, creativity, and the willingness to forge new paths.

I chose these particular women to include in my dissertation because they were each pioneers in their fields and were among the first to create foundational art, music, and literature of the borderlands in the 20th century. Each of these women broke the boundaries of convention to create her art and helped lay the foundation for the formation of a hybrid Mexican American identity and for the later development of the Chicano movement, a movement in which the indigenous Mexican and the customs and folkways of the borderlands were valued in both politics and art. Each of the women used hybridization in their work, bringing the themes and styles of the American and the Mexican together in their work. Jovita González brought the folk tales of Mexico to a

largely Anglo audience through her work with J. Frank Dobie and the Texas Folklore Society. She both was influenced by and influenced the Anglo folk scholars of this time, and Dobie's understanding of Mexican and Mexican American *vaquero* culture was doubtless expanded by her work. Her fiction also was a hybrid, written from the viewpoint of the Mexican rancher, yet also showing the Anglo culture of South Texas in a flattering light. The book, *Caballero*, was written with an Anglo co-author, bringing Anglos and Mexican American viewpoints on the Mexican American War together in one novel.

Rosita Fernández sang in both English and Spanish, to Anglo and Mexican American audiences. She performed for Lyndon and Ladybird Johnson many times and co-starred with John Wayne, bringing Mexican music and dress to the attention of prominent Anglos and helping to make the songs of Mexico a part of Texas culture.

Chelo González Amezcua used the themes and techniques of Spain, Mexico, and the U.S. in her art. Her subject matter was also Spanish, Mexican, and American. She wrote poetry in both Spanish and English, sometimes using both languages in one poem. She wrote of Spanish legends and history as well as Mexican border life. But she also wrote about San Antonio and the building of Hemisphere, and other American subjects. Her art was shown on both sides of the border and praised in both American and Mexican newspapers.

Alicia Dickerson Montemayor was both Mexican-and Irish-American. Her art used the naive themes of Mexican folk art and the nature of the border to create a distinctive style in which the women and nature of the borderlands were central. Her

depiction of the Mexican American customs and traditions of the border created a hybrid Mexican American art.

During the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican Americans created a flourishing of art, music, literature, dance, theater that included U.S. and Mexican influences. The women I discuss possessed a strong sense of *Mexicanidad* and of Mexican American culture being the center—rather than the periphery—in their creative endeavors long before the Chicano movement legitimized this stance. The cultural creators I look at valued both the indigenous Mexican and the Spanish—the bright colors and nature portrayed in Mexican folk art, the architecture and literature of Spain, the folkloric music of Mexico, and popular tales and stories of the Mexican border. They saw value in the Texas borderlands and used its culture and nature as a subject for their art. Far from seeing Del Rio or Laredo as small-town desert wastelands without culture, these small border towns became cultural oases for these women, the centers where their artistic genius flourished.

Previous works of scholarship have given little attention to Mexican American women in the arts. Those scholars who have looked at Mexican American cultural creators have tended to focus on only one field, such as visual art or music. Few have examined the cultural creators of the Mexican American generation. Very little has been written about how the artistic movements of this period have affected cultural identity and the formation of a hybrid Mexican American identity.

Author and folklorist Jovita González often appeared to be accommodationist, working within the structures of Anglo society to gain respect and success. A member of

the “*gente decente*,” she showed great concern with class distinctions and with gaining whiteness and worked to earn acceptability in Anglo society. Although she broke the bounds of Mexican American conventional womanhood of her time by attending college, earning a master’s degree, and pursuing a teaching career, her deportment and demeanor remained conventional. But within the constrictions she felt were necessary to gain acceptance and success, she was actually very daring. She wrote a novel about the Mexican American War from the point of view of powerful Mexican ranchers who lost their land as the Americans invaded. She did field work for her folklore research as a woman alone, traveling to ranches throughout the Rio Grande Valley. She supported her husband in his efforts to create a bilingual education program in Corpus Christi at a time when such a program was cutting edge and controversial. She saw the value of the folk tales of Mexican Americans, even those of the common people whom she viewed with a certain disdain, and published them. She challenged the customs of Mexican American patriarchal society by earning her master’s degree, working as an intellectual, and giving the women in her literature agency while criticizing the male ranchers and heads of families for their machismo.

Unlike Laredo artist Alicia Dickerson Montemayor, González was not outspoken about Mexican American rights and was less directly involved in the political sphere. Montemayor was not afraid to offend and openly spoke out against women’s oppression and about the importance of Mexican American rights. Half-Irish-American, she did not appear to be seeking whiteness or acceptability in white society in the way González did and even married a man from Mexico. This confidence may in part have arisen from the

fact that Montemayor lived her life in Laredo, a city with few Anglos and a strong intact Mexican American culture, while González spent time in several different cities with larger Anglo populations, including San Antonio and Austin, eventually settling in Corpus Christi. Montemayor also was more willing to challenge gender norms than González, speaking out quite frankly against male leadership in LULAC, while González gained her recognition from within the male power structure, working closely with Dobie.

Yet the two women shared many qualities. They centered their work in the borderlands, creating a foundational art and literature of the border. They crossed back and forth across the border freely, both personally and in their art. Montemayor and González traveled in Mexico. González situated her characters on both sides of the border, and they crossed it easily. From Mier to Roma to Monterrey to Brownsville, González's work is set in a murky in-between land that is as much as *norteño* as American. Montemayor's artistic influences and subject matter, like González's, are very much of the border.

González and Del Rio artist Chelo González Amezcua differed in their social class and educational backgrounds. González Amezcua came from a humble background while González claimed a higher social status. González possessed extensive formal education, while González Amezcua was a high school dropout and spent most of her life working at Kress department store. While González received prestigious grants to fund her research, González Amezcua had so little money that she was forced to draw in her off hours on bits of cardboard she saved or found, having neither time nor materials.

But González Amezcua, like González, wrote literature and poetry from the Mexican perspective, calling out the white power structure for its inequalities. Her poetry and art also addressed issues of gender equality. Like González, she romanticized the world of old Spain and the Moors. Her art depicting Spanish castles and Moorish princes was reminiscent of the stories of the old traditional *hacenderos* of Mexico with their ties to Spain.

González differed from singer Rosita Fernández in some of the same ways that she differed from González Amezcua. She was more upper class and more educated than Fernández. But they both accommodated to white society in order to succeed. Fernández and González both worked to fit into the idealized image of the Mexican woman in order to gain acceptance. Rosita Fernández made her career playing to tourists in San Antonio as well as locals, and capitalized on the image of a romantic image of a Mexican woman. Like González, Fernández had a strong sense of *Mexicandidad*, portraying an idealized Mexican identity for the world. She also conformed to conventional gender roles. Just as González followed her husband to his teaching posts in Corpus Christi instead of pursuing a doctorate, Fernández obeyed her husband and confined her performances chiefly to San Antonio, though managing to negotiate a compromise which allowed her to sing in public.

Chelo González Amezcua was an artist and poet who stood out from the group for her solitary imagination and for the spirituality that imbued her work. This she shared with Montemayor. Both found a spirituality in nature and in the women they painted, often depicted in women's relationship with nature. Both enjoyed the birds and flowers

of their own gardens, painting and writing about the nature that surrounded them in their border cities of Del Rio and Laredo. Montemayor was far more outward looking and political in her work than González Amezcua, though neither one of them created art that was directly political. Montemayor's work was imbued with the aesthetic of Mexican folk art, while González Amezcua's aesthetic glorified the Spanish and Moorish more than the indigenous. Both created an art of the borderlands. Limited by their father's death just as they would have left home to pursue a higher education, they remained in their border hometowns and worked outside the home most of their lives. Montemayor worked for a time at Kress department stores in Laredo, while González Amezcua was employed at the Kress branch in Del Rio for much of her life. While Montemayor married and had children, González Amezcua remained rooted in the solitude of her own imagination, finding joy in her art and poetry. Although González Amezcua created artwork for much of her life, Montemayor first began painting in her seventies. But both found fame only as older women, as the Chicano art movement grew and their work began to be recognized.

González Amezcua was very different than Fernández in many ways, being drawn more to solitude and inwardness, while Fernández was a performer. But González Amezcua shared much of Fernández's self-presentation, with her filigree silver jewelry matching her filigree art, her dark hair in an updo. Like Fernández, she sometimes dressed in traditional Mexican dress, and she enjoyed music and dance. Although the women were very different in personality and in the forms their artistic production took,

they shared a sense of *Mexicanidad* and were able to bring a Mexican aesthetic to a U.S. audience.

Of all the women, Montemayor was the most political and the most outspoken. She broke gender barriers in many ways: by owning her own business, holding a national office in LULAC, and becoming a painter. She even broke barriers of age expectations, seeing no obstacles to becoming an artist in her seventies. Her travels in Mexico and her Mexican husband gave her a strong sense of Mexican identity that influenced her art, with its Mexican folk art feel. Although half Irish American, she seemed to identify chiefly as Mexican American, and this mixed background may have given her the confidence to step outside of the traditional roles held by Mexican American women.

All four women stepped outside of the bounds of convention and broke boundaries. González defied convention by becoming a scholar as well as by her critique of Anglo triumphalism and her criticism of Mexican American patriarchy and class structures. Fernández broke boundaries by performing in public against her husband's wishes, singing for large crowds and acting in movies. Even in her early career she earned her living in public ways such as allowing her face to appear in advertisements for tortilla companies and singing jingles on the radios. Montemayor rebelled against conventional behavior by criticizing the men in power in LULAC and by becoming a national officer herself. In her art, she was unconventional in her subject matter and technique, as well as in beginning a painting career as an untrained artist in her seventies. González Amezcua was unconventional in her solitary pursuit of her creativity

and her ability put her dream world, based in Spanish myth and history and Mexican techniques, on paper for the appreciation of both Anglo and Mexican American audiences. She also rebelled in the anger of some of her poems, showing the constraints of her own life as a Mexican American and the prejudice against Mexican Americans in Texas society.

All of these women identified strongly with the borderlands. They made the borderlands the center, rather than the periphery. The world that others would consider the centers of power or artistic importance—New York; Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles; Mexico City—became the periphery for these women. All of them used the nature and culture of the borderlands as a basis for their art. The plants, animals and customs of the border were normative in the work they created. They also brought to Texas a Mexican aesthetic, Mexican art forms and Mexican stories and tales. In the case of González Amezcua and González, they even drew directly from Spanish and Moorish sources. Fernández ignored the call of Hollywood in order to build a successful career in the very Mexican city of San Antonio.

As they created their art, they stepped outside of the traditional boundaries set for Mexican women and helped pave the way for the formation of a hybrid Mexican American identity. They were women who made their homes in multiple worlds, at home in the culture and art forms of Mexico and the border, as well as in the art galleries of Austin and the concert halls of San Antonio. They brought the world of the border and of Mexico to mainstream America, while forging a pathway for other Mexican

Americans, laying the foundation for the creative renaissance that would come with the Chicano movement.

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